COMRADES OF THE CLOUDS

LAURIE YORK ERSKINE

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Comrades of the Clouds

By LAURIE YORK ERSKINE

FINE FELLOWS
POWER OF THE HILLS
THE COMING OF COSGROVE
VALOR OF THE RANGE
THE CONFIDENCE MAN
THE LAUGHING RIDER
THE RIVER TRAIL
AFTER SCHOOL
RENFREW RIDES AGAIN
RENFREW OF THE ROYAL MOUNTED
RENFREW RIDES THE SKY
COMRADES OF THE CLOUDS

"A false move—!" cried a voice of steel and ice behind them, "a false move and I fire!"

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Comrades of the Clouds

BY

Laurie York Erskine

Illustrations by
Sven Elvén

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"A FALSE MOVE—!" CRIED A VOICE OF STEEL AND ICE BEHIND THEM, "A FALSE MOVE AND I FIRE!" . . . . . *frontispiece*

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CHAPTER I

Durland Takes Command

TWENTY pilots made up the Seventy-Seventh Aero Squadron, A.E.F. Twenty pilots who loitered about the hangars below and the air above, impatient for a leader who would take them into the action for which they craved. In the turmoil of a nation newly entered in the greatest conflict mankind had ever known, these twenty had been trained to fly, transported to this aërodrome in France, given a veteran of the French Air Service to command them —and had then been apparently forgotten.

Fully equipped, they were, with Nieuports, guns and gear. Four flights of mechanics, munitions, parts and fuel. But no leader; no man who would call them in from the sham combats they waged over the flying field, from the hours they spent on the machine gun range, from the orgies of stunting and hedge hopping they pursued, and lead them over the lines, into that strange wilderness of the air where the enemy flew.

Their place was there, where the hunting was, where a flyer might fight duels of skill and marks-

manship and courage with the aces of the German service. But, instead, they loitered and played, while the best men among them sulked in unhappy idleness, and such men as Pennock and Trafford alone were content.

Eighteen out of the twenty who made up the squadron were agreed that Pennock and Trafford were two of a kind. Every one of the eighteen sensed that the squadron needed spirit; that quality without which no group of men can accomplish its end. And in spirit Pennock and Trafford both seemed gravely lacking. In their lack of a wholesome ambition, in their evasion of all the demands that a spirited squadron should have made upon them and in the success with which they pursued a program of personal safety, never leaving the ground unless compelled to, they were a blot upon the fair name which the loyal eighteen yearned to make for Squadron Seventy-Seven.

Pennock, for instance. Pennock was an old-timer. Before any other man in the squadron, except Durland, had so much as felt the blast of the propeller, Pennock had fought in the air with the British Flying Corps. But did he lend his knowledge to these new companions of the air which his transfer to the American service had given him? No. . . . Oh, no. Under the benign and placid command of Major Drou-

hin, Lieutenant Pennock saw something of France. When he was not engaged in his quarters with a good book, or strolling in fine weather through the pleasant countryside, Pennock was constantly abroad by sidecar or motor upon missions of friendship or diplomacy for his commander.

Drouhin, elderly, genial, and confident that the entrance of the United States meant the end of war, easily persuaded himself that things along his sector were, in the air, too quiet to warrant the expenditure of fuel for aggressive flying. It was also easily made apparent that all these fine young Americans were too lacking in experience to be pressed over the lines, and too valuable to be sacrificed without long training

When the fine young Americans protested in various degrees of heat that they couldn't learn fighting by studying the roofs of their own hangars, he would shrug, and lift his eyebrows, and chuckle gleefully.

"Keen!" he would cry, in a little explosion. "Keen! It ees good, *mes enfants!* It ees boollee! But we mus' be with great care for you!"

With deep feeling and a wealth of passionate gesture he would discuss his responsibilities with Pennock, who was the only man in the crowd who could talk French. Finally the two would make off together in the squadron car, to visit with some peas-

ant, priest or potentate who would talk with them interminably—just talk.

Considering that, in addition to this strange conduct, old Drouhin had made Pennock a flight leader (in spite of a protest from Pennock which the squadron knew nothing about), the discontent of Durland, Squires, Kopel and the rest boiled into indignation. They had come over to fight in a war, to win laurels for themselves and for their country. They were keen to pit their skill against the enemy, and they were confident of the outcome.

"Don't worry," advised Durland, frowning his doubt of the thing he hoped for and desired. "It won't last. General Mitchell's out for results, and he's going to get 'em. If they don't replace Drouhin within the next week or so, I miss my bet. We'll get some action then."

They heard him with respect; they assented to his optimism with cheers, for Durland was a man you could believe. Durland thought a lot and talked little. Durland was a veteran: he had brought down Huns. Durland had flown with the Lafayette Flying Corps. Durland, felt Seventy-Seven, ought to be squadron commander. The squadron would see some action, then.

Three days later Drouhin was recalled. The following day Durland was promoted to a captain's

commission and placed in command of the squadron. The action began immediately.

Durland took Number One Flight up in the evening of his promotion. Squires flew close to his right wing. McChord and Mathews flew side by side behind. Hammel brought up the rear.

Durland was out for action, out to hunt for the enemy and down him. No more reconnaissance and joy riding for the pilots of Seventy-Seven. So Durland crossed the lines, flew northward, flew southward, encountered nothing, turned with the sun behind him and led his pilots deeply behind the lines. Twelve miles over he spotted a half-dozen Albatross scouts making toward him. He turned, to climb above the approaching enemy, and as he turned he noticed a German aërodrome below him. The Albatross pilots were defending their nest. He turned again and approached the enemy at a right angle. As he did so, he signaled his followers to prepare for combat.

The Germans swept about and divided. Three of them flew straight at him, three more circled to pounce upon his tail. He veered away, did a neat *renversement,* and came directly down upon the tail of the German leader. Another Albatross was below him to the left. He fired a short burst at a hundred yards, then readjusted his aim for another. Fired

again. The Albatross turned on its side, turned over, tilted downward and plunged like a bomb for the earth. Durland turned to the other, which was striving to find his tail. As he turned he heard gunfire from a distance.

From a distance—and he had thought his flight was behind him.

Then he understood. They hadn't seen the enemy. They had flown on above his quick-turning, diving plane. The Germans were shooting them to bits. He must join them. But first—there was this Albatross. . . . And there was a top string pilot at its controls. It twisted and whirled like a live thing, while the Nieuport twisted and whirled to outmaneuver it. The gunfire continued in the distance.

Then Durland knew he could not wait. He couldn't dance and stunt here to save his wretched hide while his green pilots fell into Germany. He'd have to take a chance. He took it. He leveled out and gave the Albatross a look at his back. Instantly the Albatross leveled out behind him, and he heard the rattle of its gun; felt the picking of its shot about his fuselage. In a red rage he snapped his ship about and found himself rushing directly into the face of his opponent. He fired mechanically, cold with the fear of death. The Albatross shot upward, its undercarriage missing his wingtop by inches. It broke in

the air behind him, falling with shattered wings.

He was flying toward that sound of firing now, but the sound of firing had ceased. He saw four Albatross scouts drawing together in formation, and at a hundred and ten miles an hour he was rushing toward them. In a single, swift survey, he realized the situation. There was no other plane in sight. Only these four enemies and himself. The others had gone. Shot down or escaped. He was alone against four—and their aërodrome was beneath them. He turned and fled, nose down for speed, and an occasional swerve for luck. As he neared the lines three Nieuports ceased their circling to fall in behind and follow him.

Back on the flying field Squires, his brows slightly aloft in great anxiety and self-reproach, reported to him.

"We didn't see 'em," he explained woefully. "We flew right over you, and when we turned to see where you'd gone, they jumped us. They got poor Verne Mathews. I saw him fall, and they'd have got the rest of us if we hadn't beat it. Then we circled around and hunted for you. We didn't want to leave you alone. . . ."

"It was fine!" Durland reassured him. "You as much as cut off the others while I concentrated on the two I dived for. And you got out of it like old-

timers. I'm sorry about Verne, but it might have been worse. As it is, that's two Huns for the squadron, and you fellows are well blooded. Just keep your eyes open after this. Fly 'round and practice looking for ships before you start any fighting. I'll take up Number Two in the morning." He stopped short, remembering suddenly that Number Two was Pennock's flight.

"No," he said. "I'll take up Number Three."

CHAPTER II

Seventy-Seven Gets Some Action

WITH Number Three Flight Durland hunted more warily. The death of Verne Mathews had hit him hard with a doubt of his own capacity for leadership. How far had he been to blame? His responsibility for the lives and achievements of his men, new as they were to the ghastly game they played, haunted him. He must be wary. He must be alert. He must teach them. They must learn how to survey the air above and below them as well as on their own private level. He would take Number Three Flight up and down the lines, find them a Hun or two, and ask them to report all they had seen.

Pawling, the flight leader, shocked and aghast at the sudden taking off of Mathews, who, last fall, had played beside him on a freshman football team, scanned the skies hungrily. All through the patrol he strained his eyes, and hung on to Durland's tail. He saw nothing. When Durland turned, to avoid a flock of Fokkers which danced a thousand yards away in the hazy east, Pawling followed him without know-

ing the reason for that turn. When Durland soared abruptly, to discourage investigation of three two-seaters which appeared suddenly below his nose, Pawling led the flight upward in his wake in blissful ignorance of what hung in the air beneath them. It was difficult for a pilot to accustom his eyes to the camouflaged forms of planes against the clouds or against the vari-colored earth.

Durland, turning homeward, dipped sharply, seeking warmer regions a mile or so nearer the earth. Pawling, seeing a German observation plane just off to the right of the steep pathway Durland followed, remembered his leader's assurance that a Hun would be given them, and used his head. Durland was avoiding the Hun. That would be to give Pawling and his men a chance. Gleefully he swept from his position, remembered all he had learned of how a two-seater should be attacked, and dived under the German's tail.

He cut it too close and got the wash from the German's propeller in his wings. It kicked him out of his dive, and he wallowed under the two-seater, without control. The German swerved, and Pawling saw the observer's head peering over upon him. He tried to kick his machine over under the other's belly, and wondered where the rest of the boys were as the

German gunner fired. He seemed to fire without taking aim, as the old-time Westerner fanned from the hip. A snap shot. A tricky, expert shot. Pawling saw the track of the tracers make their swift pathway to his cowling. He saw his instrument board shattered before his eyes, and a sharp blow struck his knee, with a ghastly, penetrating thrust that pierced without paining him. Then his prop was stiff before him, and he was diving with a dead engine. Diving while the German pilot circled to give his gunner a clear field.

The bullets tacked and ticked through Pawling's fuselage as the gunner concentrated on him; and as he was doing so, Durland swept back with the three remaining members of the flight. The German gunner never saw the plane that killed him. The German pilot hurtled down through a mile of space with his head buried in his arms, and flame enfolding him. Durland flew homeward, again with one man missing, again with an intolerable burden of doubt and sorrow and responsibility.

"I didn't see the darned two-seater," he cried remorsefully. "I thought Pawling was behind me 'til I heard his guns go off."

"That's all right," grinned Slade. "Old Pawling landed neat as a bird on our side of the lines! Nothing but a dud engine. And that's another Hun for

the squadron. Can we come with you this afternoon, Durly?"

"Three in two days," murmured Durland. "Not so bad. Which one of you fellows got that pilot?"

"Morton," said Slade promptly. "I was trying for him myself, and saw the tracers go home. Boy, it was fun!"

"Guess I'll take up Number Four before lunch," said Durland.

Number Four did its trick without casualties, and Durland landed them precisely at noon. Slade greeted him.

"Pawling's shot!" he cried. "Bullet went through his knee. He's out of whack for a month or more. They phoned up from the hospital after you'd gone."

Durland frowned, again feeling that anguish of remorse.

"That's two good pilots out," he said. "We'll have to snap to it, if we're going to hold our own."

A non-com came trotting from the telephone hut.

"Two German two-seaters have been alerted, sir," he reported to Durland. "They passed over our lines in the vicinity of Apremont."

Durland stood for an instant poised in thought.

"Fill it up," he ordered his mechanician, "and tell Lieutenant Pennock to prepare his flight. I'll take 'em up for a scrap."

CHAPTER III

Pennock Shows His Hand

ALL Number Four Flight, with Slade and Squires among them, stood and saw Pennock lead his flight into the air in the wake of Durland's plane. Hieneman and Volland were side by side behind him and Trafford tagged along behind. Too far behind. Late in the take-off, he visibly permitted the flight to outdistance him.

"Two of a kind," muttered Squires contemptuously. "God help old Durland, if the Huns show fight."

"Fill up that ship with gas, you plumbers!" yelled Kopel suddenly. "I'm going out to see the fun. Those Huns belong to Seventy-Seven! Anybody coming?"

He took off with Squires and Averill struggling to overtake him, and Brown racing with Slade to join formation. They made straight for the lines at St. Mihiel, searching the skies eagerly for the spectacle they had come to see. As they flew they climbed, and as they climbed they had the lines below them.

High in the hazes of the noonday sky, they became

aware once more of the colossal theater which surrounded them. An empyrean in which a flying plane was a gnat, a speck, a thing of infinite insignificance; and it might be above, below, to north, east, south or west. Then, below them they heard the gunfire. They looked down, and saw the circling, fighting planes. It seemed as though the combatants were flat toys of one dimension which moved close against the earth, and a web of fiery tracings enmeshed their moving forms. That was the fight they had come to see, and they had gallery seats.

Two big German two-seaters circled with wary skill, each covering the other's blind spots, each giving its gunner a wide field of vision. The five Nieuports were scattered. One was dipping and swerving about in glorious action. That was Durland, sure and definite in his every maneuver. Two more circled warily, dipping now and then, for the attack. Another was rapidly becoming obscure against the distant earth. Sinking, circling and sliding as it sank. The fifth hung upon the utmost outskirt of the fray, and as Squires gazed down, it plunged for one two-seater.

Squires saw its tracers make their pathway in a woeful line, far off the German's tail, and the German fire seemed to riddle the Nieuport's body. Then the Nieuport went spinning down, until, abruptly, its

nose came up and it made a bee line for home.

Squires aimed at the group below him and plunged down. His companions followed, and as they dove one of the three Nieuports below flamed red, slid away from the fight, and went dancing down with a trail of black smoke in its wake.

It was Kopel who riddled one German pilot with his bullets, and Slade who accounted for the gunner of the second plane. The surviving German pilot turned a sheet-white face to the Nieuports which closed in on him, and set the nose of his plane at the yellow earth beneath. They circled downward, to intercept his flight for the German lines; but he outwitted them. He pulled up his nose with a mighty effort at escape, and his wings snapped back as though sheared from their supports by a gigantic knife. He held his hands high above his head as he plunged to the earth. It was as though he surrendered—or as though he prayed.

Kopel learned the truth of their casualties when he returned to the aërodrome. Hieneman it was who had gone down in flames; and he was Kopel's friend. The two German-American lads had come from the same town where they had lived since childhood on the same block and fought their ways through the same rough school. Kopel, hearing the news, collapsed on a bench beside the hangar and sobbed with

unrestrained grief and blind resentment. It was his first lesson in the ugly reality which lay beneath the surface of gay adventure that covers war like a bright cloak.

Trafford—the news came later by telephone—had drifted downward from the fight, and had not halted until he felt beneath his feet the nearest earth. Pennock had made one mad attack upon the enemy, blazing blindly into the sky with both his guns, and then, developing engine trouble, had flown home. Durland, personally inspecting the engine, found that it worked as effectively as had been necessary to bring Pennock home in record time. So Durland had words with Pennock.

"I'm taking Volland out of your flight," he said among other things. "That leaves you Trafford. He won't lead you into danger."

Pennock, who was a peculiar sort of chap, given to books and letter writing, more thoughtful than the rest, and strangely quiet, faced him squarely.

"I expected you'd put another man in command, and switch me to another flight," he said. And he smiled. It was a singularly pleasant, wistful smile, but because it was a smile it aroused Durland's anger.

"I don't want to cripple another flight!" he snapped sharply. "Group headquarters made you a flight leader, Pennock, and a flight leader you'll have to

stay. There's only one thing will remove you." He drew closer to Pennock and lowered his voice. "If you ever turn your back on a scrap again when your men are mixed up in it—it means a court-martial."

Pennock gazed at him for a moment in silence. There was neither resentment nor remorse in his eyes. He gazed on his young commander reflectively, thoughtfully, in a manner that angered Durland and yet puzzled him.

"I understand," he said at last; and his voice was very quiet. He spoke as a man might speak who has been told that he has six months to live, and was able to meet the news without wincing.

"You're letting us down, Pennock," said Durland. "You've had as much experience in this game as any of us, and you know how important spirit is. These boys are all keen and ready to make the most powerful unit on the front. But we've got to give 'em the leadership. We've got to arouse a squadron spirit that'll sweep everything before it. And you're letting us down!"

"Perhaps you're right," brooded Pennock.

"Right?" Durland's anger flamed into words. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I suppose it is important to herd them all into it right up to the end. The Germans haven't got much more fight left in them. When Uncle Sam

came in, it meant the end of the War. You know that. And I hate to see the fresh men come up to be slaughtered; come up to be killed. Uselessly. Just to drive home a victory that's already won."

"But it isn't won! Not by a long shot! Like every hard game you've ever played, the last ten minutes of play is the spell that's going to decide it. And the team that can throw the most fresh men into that last ten minutes is going to win. But we've got to throw 'em in! You're tired, Pennock. You're through. Or you could never speak like that. These men have got to go in and we've got to send 'em in with the will to win."

"Yes," said Pennock slowly. "I can see that."

"And you're going to do your part," urged Durland. "Or . . ."

"Or what?"

"Sit on the bench."

"With the quitters."

"Yes. With the quitters. There's no place in the squadron for armchair flyers."

"Thank you," said Pennock; and he moved away.

CHAPTER IV

Two of a Kind

KEN DURLAND retired that night with a burden of care in his heart which made sleep impossible. He was torn between his consideration for each pilot of the squadron and a sense of responsibility for the squadron's success. Seventy-Seven must do its job. It must be dedicated to the proposition of making the air untenable for enemy flyers as far as it was possible to do so. But in achieving this no member of the squadron must be sacrificed needlessly.

How could he bring both those ends together?

By molding the hot, eager spirit of his pilots into a squadron spirit which would be irresistible; and by teaching them the science of battle in the air. And it needed work. Constant work, for only by experience would they learn. Also, he must give them no opportunity to dwell upon the death they courted. Kopel had felt deeply the death of Hieneman . . . he must remember that . . . he must get a new roommate for Kopel, a new chum. And spirit. . . . The squadron must be inflamed with a desire to outstrip, in the results achieved, any other squadron on the front.

In the morning Durland called his pilots together and addressed them.

"Yesterday's work," he said, "puts us ahead of every other American squadron. Our nearest rival is Forty-Three with five enemy planes to their credit in two weeks of fighting. But we don't want to rest until we've put 'em way in the background, and run up a score they can't compete with. Then there's a British squadron we've got to look out for. Major Renfrew, in command of Forty-Nine Squadron R.F.C., is one of the Royal Flying Corps aces. His men are crackerjack pilots, and we've got to hustle if we're going to keep up with them.

"That means work; and training. We've got to put in all the time we can on our gunnery and keep our machines in perfect condition. I'm going to call on you to do a great deal of formation work and sham battle practice; and I want every man to regard himself as an ace of aces who's only got to put in time and work to win his rating. Just remember that whenever a German flyer sees a Red Comet coming his way, it means sure death for him unless he runs for home. . . ."

Then, after breakfast, Trafford showed up. Shamelessly he admitted that he'd run from the fight. He had been scared to death, that was all there was to it. All he'd been able to think of was the ground under-

neath him, and he hadn't been able to get to it quickly enough. Durland could court-martial him, if he liked, or send him back to a ground job. But he wasn't going to risk his neck just to give his relatives something to remember him by.

Durland was deeply occupied with reports and confirmations. The depleted ranks of his squadron had to be filled. His pilots must be taught every trick he knew, from the essential care of gun and engine, the minute inspection of cartridges, belts, synchronizing gear, lock, bolt and barrel, to the intricate lore of the upper air; the freedom of maneuver within the limitations of the plane, and the limitations of every enemy machine.

In the face of these considerations, these responsibilities, Trafford, his fears and his failings, were insignificant. Durland would have to get rid of the man, that was all. And Pennock. They'd have to be sent back. They were a drag upon an otherwise promising squadron. They must pass out of the picture and give place to men of the right sort. He wouldn't judge them—he'd just send in a report. Headquarters could do the judging.

And headquarters did. Headquarters judged that it was up to Durland to take the material given him and make an efficient fighting unit from it. He must deal with his own problems of personnel.

At the end of a day which had bereft him of Vogel and Boyd, with no compensating victories, this rebuke struck deeply into Durland's earnest heart. With these two slackers he was to be burdened, it seemed, as the Ancient Mariner had been burdened with the ill-omened bird. The finest of his pilots might fight and fall and die, but these two would remain. Secure, fearful, two of a wretched kind, they would evade all danger and imperil every man with whom they flew. . . .

Well, they wouldn't fly. . . . In that Durland was determined. As far as he was concerned they could pass out of the picture and they could stay out. . . . Pennock could continue in the ridiculous position of flight leader, and his flight would consist of Trafford. They could keep one another company, and the squadron would have to bear the burden of their shame. . . .

Squadron Seventy-Seven continued to get all the action it wanted. In flights and in flocks, or in couples, the pilots went forth to the fighting. A tottering enemy was flinging all its finest flyers into the air above that breach which an American army was battering in its line. The air behind the German lines was busy with droning, death-dealing planes. The sacrificial courage of Squadron Seventy-Seven soared to meet the challenge. Its pilots became ter-

rible in their persistence; magnificent in their contempt for the perils they defied.

Charlie McChord, trapped with his flight, munitionless and low of fuel, and with a dozen Fokkers between him and the lines, flew straight into the German formation and fell, bullet-riddled, while his men got safely through. Bill Black, having engaged an ace of German aces, saw that champion shooting down his followers as though they were defenseless. With a gun jammed, and a skill inadequate to the occasion, he hurled his plane upon the German and went down with him in a burning pile of wreckage. The spectacle of comrades flaming in mid-air, hurtling without wings to the distant ground, or riddled with explosive bullets in their places became commonplace events to Squadron Seventy-Seven. Only, for each such spectacle, the enemy must pay, and the collection of that toll filled the skies with their battling planes and littered the earth below with shattered wings and broken, crippled men. Pennock and Trafford, for their sins, were not invited to these forays.

Trafford shamelessly exploited his immunity. In the cafés and congregations of the towns and villages about the aërodrome he brazenly accepted the honors which were heaped upon the members of his squadron; and he avoided meetings with the more excitable among those members.

Only now and then, on days when foggy weather prohibited flying, he fell victim to the resentment of his fellows. On such days it was the custom to trap Trafford before he could leave the 'drome, and force him into the air with a couple of reckless devils at his tail. They would fly him ragged—pounce upon him in tight corners, brush his wings with theirs, press him, by dire peril, to the accomplishment of hideous, soul-torturing stunts. Then they would gather about him when he landed and gaze with grave, puzzled faces upon his trembling abandonment to fear.

In this respect they admitted without realizing it that Pennock and Trafford were not, in spite of their strictures, really two of a kind. They never heaped upon Pennock such indignities as Trafford suffered at their hand. Pennock, to be sure, had made that mad gesture of attack before his shame overtook him. From time to time he flew. He even tagged along behind an occasional foray over the lines. But he was never there in the scrimmage. They remembered that, and it cut him off from them. He became, as it were, a strange visitor about the aërodrome. A quiet, thoughtful young man who smoked his pipe, read many books, and seemed deaf to the frank comments which placed him in the discussions of the mess as one with Trafford, the coward.

CHAPTER V

Not of a Kind

IT was on a Sunday evening that the dire news reached Squadron Seventy-Seven that confirmations to date credited Squadron Forty-Three with eighteen enemy planes. That was two more than Seventy-Seven could number, and the War could not last forever. By eleven o'clock Monday morning every available plane of Seventy-Seven was off to the hunting. Every pilot was in the air—every pilot excepting Pennock and Trafford, who could only handicap the squadron's efforts.

Pennock who on such occasions as this could not resign himself without a struggle of which the squadron was completely ignorant, had returned from the hangars where he had paced nervously along the flying line long after the last flight had taken off. In his quarters he had continued his pacing until it seemed as though he became, somehow, resigned. With a little crooked smile which did combat with a frown, he settled himself in a decrepit armchair, lit a pipe and took to himself a book. Trafford, seeking company, found him there some twenty minutes later.

"This bunch of suicides," proclaimed Trafford woefully, "have gone completely bugs. They think they've got mixed up in a grand sort of football game, and they're so looney they seem to enjoy getting shot in the neck."

"I'm just rereading *The Brothers Karamazov*," suggested Pennock inhospitably. "Ever try Dostoievsky?"

"No, I don't believe in patent medicines."

"You ought to try Dostoievsky. He explains the way men think."

"Let him explain the way they act. That's what interests me. Now these lunatics, here. What do they want to see me killed for? I don't like this game, and they do. They don't know what fear is. They buzz off over the lines saying to themselves . . ."

"Nothing!" Pennock slapped down his book and spoke sharply. "The trouble with you is, Trafford, that you think you're the only man who knows the feeling of fear. You're wrong. The rest of the boys feel it just the same as you do. They don't say anything to themselves when they buzz off over the lines, because they're scared speechless. All that carries them through is——"

"Is what? You know so much. What is it that carries 'em through if it isn't that they're all cuckoo?"

"It's— Well, put it another way." He paused. "I came over here to die. I knew it meant that, and I thought I was all ready for it. I even hoped it would come quickly. I wanted to die and have it over with. But I funk it every time.

"These boys are different. They want to live. The War doesn't mean death to them, it means another kind of life; a new way to prove the quality of their manhood—a new way to succeed. They're all trusting to luck and praying to God that they'll come through to reap the rewards they think it will bring them. They put the other man's death out of their minds. They fight on their nerve. They fight in spite of their fear. They fight because of their fear. They fight to prove that they can overcome it. It's a test of manhood."

"Which means, I suppose, that you and me are just little yellow curs."

Pennock gazed coolly into Trafford's mocking eyes.

"Yes," he said. "That's exactly what it means."

Trafford was taken aback.

"You seem to think an awful lot of yourself," he sneered feebly.

"I do, in the sense that I think about myself an awful lot. That's the trouble. I think too much. And when I think that I can go out and take my medicine, I'm always mistaken. I don't seem to get

the incentive. When the pinch comes, I can't feel anything to fight for— So I'm a little yellow cur. See?"

Somebody pounded on the door. Pennock arose, and opened it. A telephone sergeant entered.

"There's a German bomber reported to the south of Toul, sir. The group operations officer wants us to send up some machines."

Trafford exploded in a short, harsh laugh.

"You tell that operations officer that there aren't any pilots here. They're all out running up scores."

"Lieutenant Trafford is joking!" snapped a hard, metallic voice from the doorway. "Please see that his machine and my own are rolled out immediately. We will ascend at once."

CHAPTER VI

Things Men Fight For

THE sergeant departed. Trafford sneered mockingly into Pennock's face.

"All roused up and rarin' to go?" he laughed. "Found something to fight for, eh?"

"Yes," said Pennock. "I have. You've got just two minutes to get your helmet and climb into your ship. That's orders."

He walked over to a bureau by his bed and opened a drawer.

"And I suppose it's a court-martial offense if I tell you to go to the devil?" mocked Trafford.

"I don't know," admitted Pennock, turning with an automatic pistol in his hand. "But I'll risk a court-martial for shooting you full of little holes if you don't do as you're told."

Trafford saw the gun and became white jelly as he saw Pennock's cold determination. Three minutes later he was in the cockpit of his Nieuport, and two minutes after that he was zooming above the trees that bound the flying field, with Pennock close upon his tail.

Pennock had found a thing to fight for. Trafford had given it to him by that enforced admission that they were two of a kind—two little, yellow curs. And so quickly had come the opportunity to test it. Trafford would fight now—Pennock would see to that. He knew as he sat in his cockpit, clinging to Trafford's tail as a hound clings to the trail of the fox, what Trafford had known when he looked into Pennock's automatic—that he could shoot Trafford down without hesitation or remorse. . . .

Pennock herded the other plane as a collie might herd a straying sheep, and Trafford, in black terror, made no effort to escape. They came upon the German bomber as it turned back toward the lines. A great black body which bore down upon the Nieuports as a vulture might sweep down upon two doves. Pennock grinned then. With his eyes glued to the little plane which bobbed in the air below his nose, he suspected the crass fear which must have possessed the other, and he grimly tightened his thumb upon the trigger handle.

Then it occurred to him that he must climb, for the great bomber was above him. He tipped up his nose and signaled to Trafford by firing a burst from his guns. Then, as though with a burst of preposterous speed, the black belly of the bomber was sweeping over him, and Trafford was whisking about into

a dive. The bomber had passed and a gun was clattering from its cockpit. A shower of smoking bullets clicked through his wings— And Trafford was diving away.

Desperately Pennock made up his mind, and was conscious as he did so that he had forgotten fear. He must have a crack at the bomber, and then he must dive after Trafford and herd him over the lines. Trafford would never dare dive as fast as he would dive.

He was flying, nose down, into a hail of shot. Shot which clipped his wings, which splintered his struts. Shots which tugged at his shoulders and whisked by his ears. His own guns were answering, and the tracers showed him how wild was his aim.

He must adjust that. Take his time. Take it easy. . . . His nose dipped. He pulled it up. It wavered, and he became aware that his engine was spinning about without combustion. He had jerked back the throttle with his elbow. The plane went into a spin. He jerked the throttle forward and choked his engine. . . . Without knowing it, his head down in the cockpit, swearing, fighting for self-control, he spun down. With a great effort he won calmness and got the right mixture. He straightened out and gazed about him. The German bomber had gone.

A calm fury took possession of him. He must get Trafford now. The man had escaped him, but he could remedy that. Trafford would never dive as he could dive, and a Nieuport with nose down could make a hundred and eighty miles an hour without breaking. He must pick Trafford up again and herd him over the lines. Trafford would pay for that escape. . . . Trafford was going to fight!

He scanned the air beneath and about him. Trafford would make back for the aërodrome. That was northwest of him. The sun would show him the way. But there was no sun. A heavy curtain of clouds had closed above him. The sky was a leaden gray. The trenches, then. He looked for the trenches, sighted them out of the tail of his eye. He headed in the general direction of the aërodrome, not ceasing to scan the skies.

At last he saw it. A lonely plane which sped in the right direction. It was obscured by the leaden shrouds which seemed to press lower all the time, but it was speeding at right angles to him, and he was above it. Trafford would never dare to dive as he would dive. With his engine full open he set his nose down and aimed to intercept that speeding plane. His whole mind and body were at a grim tension, his every nerve alert. In no time at all the little plane

was dancing, a black silhouette above his nose. He zoomed, and it bobbed in the air below him.

For a moment Pennock held his place and considered how he was to herd the other plane about toward the lines, toward the battle. Then suddenly it tilted downward and whisked about in a vertical bank. Instantly Pennock executed a half roll which astonished himself, and was on the other's tail. That solved the problem for him. Trafford was headed for Germany now. Pennock drew his lips wide in a tight, grim smile, as he pictured the fear which turned to water the heart of the pilot of that little plane. Trafford would never have dared a turn like that unless he had been gripped by a fear. . . .

Ah! . . . The winged silhouette in front of him swerved off to the left. Down pounced Pennock, cutting him off, and again he grinned as his wings seemed to brush the other's tail plane. But the grin faded as the little plane before him swept upward in a race for the very skies, and he saw the black crosses painted on its wings.

A Hun! Not Trafford at all! Not Trafford. A Hun!

Pennock nearly looped in his effort to twist about and hold his position on the other's tail. But he did it, and as he came back into position he fired. Astounded, amazed, he saw his tracers flash straight

to the pilot's cockpit. . . . He was still firing while the German plane shot down with a dead pilot at its stick.

He had brought down a Hun! The realization came to Pennock with an irresistible sense of humor. He, Pennock, had brought down a Hun! An enemy machine! A score for the squadron!

CHAPTER VII

The Spirit of Seventy-Seven

PENNOCK stopped laughing to himself and scanned the darkened skies. Perhaps there were more! It would be a pity to fly back to the field without having a look 'round. The air might be full of German machines. He might have another chance to make a killing.

The big black body flew out of the murk upon him with such startling suddenness that he had to swerve with the speed of lightning to avoid collision. And when he swerved back he was under it, and going in its own direction. Quite leisurely he inspected the belly of it, and the black Maltese crosses under its wings.

He reflected anxiously. He was too near its nose. He throttled down. It gained above him. Then, suddenly he pulled up his nose and fired at it. His bullets shot far ahead of the giant's bow. And he almost crashed it. He slid away only in the nick of time, and went cold with a feeling he had thought he had lost as the tracers began ticking through his canvas once again. Then the whole air crackled with

machine-gun fire, and two delicate, winged things darted across the black body of the two-seater, and swept over him. A flare of red fire blazed behind him, and when he came out of his spin he saw the two-seater drifting away sideways in a mass of flame. In front of his nose two Nieuports with the red comet of Seventy-Seven painted on their sides, were bobbing toward the lines.

"Wait for poppa!" cried Pennock to his roaring engine, and a great wave of elation and relief flooded him as he fell in behind them.

The clouds had descended until they nearly touched the ground. He could not see the lines as he passed over them, and the hazy wings of his comrades appeared and disappeared in the smoky tendrils of the fog. Yet Pennock, alone of the three, landed without crashing. Slade somersaulted and wiped his machine from the lists. Durland lost a wheel.

When Durland came to help Pennock assist Slade from the wreckage, he stared at him with unbelieving eyes.

"My God!" he cried. "Then where's Bill Higgins?"

Pennock, reading the disillusionment and chagrin in his commander's voice, smiled his understanding. It was natural that Durland should have preferred immeasurably to see one of his foremost aces land

thus safely after a scrap. But Pennock could not tell him where Bill Higgins was.

In the general anxiety concerning Higgins, Pennock found no opportunity to report his own exploit. Moreover, in retrospect, it seemed to him hardly worth reporting. And he was anxious about Trafford. Trafford had not turned up. It appeared as though he had hounded the poor wretch to his death. Three days were to pass before they discovered that Trafford had landed in Germany, to be a prisoner for the duration of the War.

Then Bill Higgins returned by motorcycle from the scene of his forced landing near the lines.

"Better trot out your reports, Durly," he cried gleefully. "The frogs want to know which one of our inspired idiots was fool enough to engage Boeffler in single combat and shoot him down over the lines. The whole damned general staff saw it, and saw the comet on our ship, so it's no use trying to crawl!"

"Boeffler!" cried Durland. "Boeffler! To our squadron?" And the joy of high triumph ran like a little wave about the group which hedged Billy in, for Boeffler was first of the German aces.

"I'm afraid it was me," said Pennock.

They turned upon him, and he smiled his wistful smile.

"I was out on an alert," he explained. "I thought

I was chasing Trafford. But I lost him, and got on this fellow's tail."

He was almost apologetic, which is perhaps the reason why they treated him so roughly, so happily. He was one of the squadron, now.

CHAPTER VIII

The Coming of Arthur

IN a corner of the mess hut of the Seventy-Seventh Aëro Squadron, A.E.F., Lieutenant Harry Arthur was writing a letter home.

"Bud Grandin brought down a German Albatross this morning," he wrote, "and I went up to the front with him to get a picture of it. It had crashed right behind the Canadian line, and the souvenir hunters had left hardly anything of it. We visited the trenches. It was horrible. The men up there live in mud and filth that is unbelievable until you see it. Makes you realize that we fellows in the Air Service fight an entirely different kind of war.

"We are certainly lucky. I am, anyway, for I can't help thinking that I'd be scared to death in the trenches. I'm no fighting man, anyway, but up in the air you forget the fighting part, and the war becomes a duel. It's like the old time jousts of chivalry, and we live something like the Knights of King Arthur lived, in the books we used to read when we were kids. A man goes forth alone on a winged steed, and the combats we have are personal. Some-

times you get the feeling that you're fighting with a dragon, a winged fury, and the dragon must be slain for the good of the world—or the dragon will slay you."

At this point in his letter Lieutenant Arthur rose to follow a movement toward the bulletin board where an orderly was sorting mail. He stood by the board a moment to glance through the letters he had received, and returned to his table to find Captain Bill Higgins in his place. Higgins, a rough, good-natured victor of many aërial battles, grinned genially as he gave Arthur back his chair.

"If we're knights of old," he mocked good-naturedly, "I must be Merlin. It would take a wizard to read those hieroglyphics.'

Arthur flushed. Accustomed to a code of manners that forbade the reading of another man's private correspondence, he resented Bill's shameless curiosity. But he was a newcomer to the squadron, and Higgins was his flight commander, and a first-rate flying man. Private codes were small things in a world at war.

Lieutenant Arthur smiled.

"Guess you'd sit at the head of the table, Skipper," he said. "King Arthur and his knights, you know."

Higgins chuckled.

"Guess not," he cried. "No Arthurs in my family,

and as for the nights—I never could sit up late. You'll have to attend to the king business yourself, Arthur, me lad."

And the bluff captain was so pleased by his own rude humor that he spread it abroad through the squadron.

"King Arthur," Higgins would say satirically when Arthur turned up, heavy with sleep, for early morning patrol, "King Arthur is suffering from one of his nights."

And as time went on, the victim found it increasingly difficult to laugh.

The mocking voice of Captain Higgins, too, became less and less good-humored, for the high idealism of Lieutenant Arthur was bred in his bones, and the bluff captain couldn't understand it. Higgins was the product of a northern lumber town, son of a lumberman and a child of the camps. Arthur had been reared in a different environment, and he carried subtleties of bearing and behavior that Higgins could not comprehend.

Arthur had an irritating indifference, for instance, to the number of enemies he brought down. One day Higgins discovered from the commander of a French squadron that Arthur had brought down a German plane some few days before; and he hadn't reported it.

"Why didn't you report it?" he asked, hurrying to Arthur's quarters. "Don't you know that every plane we get counts for the squadron record?"

"I forgot about that," explained Arthur regretfully. "I just didn't think it was important whether it was reported or not, as long as I brought it down."

"Not important?" roared Higgins. "Say, are you kidding me?" He stared at the younger man in frank bewilderment.

"I mean important as far as the war goes," Arthur tried to explain. "It's bad enough to shoot the poor wretches down without sending up your own stock by doing it."

"Oh!" Higgins' voice arose, rudely sarcastic. "Oh, bad enough to shoot them down, eh? Oh, my heavens, what a rough little war it is! Well, just get this, brother. Hereafter, when you go shooting down Heinies in private, just let the rest of the army know. We don't want to waste gasoline going after Boche when you've shot them all down. See?"

He departed indignantly to obtain a confirmation of the victory to the credit of his flight and Squadron Seventy-Seven.

"The darn fool kid didn't report it!" he explained in answer to his commander's protest regarding the date. "I want to talk with you about that, too, Skipper. I'd like this kid put in another flight!"

Captain Kenneth Durland gravely regarded the indignant flight commander.

"What's the trouble? Insubordination?"

"No!" cried Higgins, impatiently realizing how difficult it would be to explain the trouble. "It's just that he isn't the right sort. He's a dreamy, moonstruck sort of kid. Sort of batty!" He sought frantically for words, and was suddenly inspired.

"Here's what I mean!" he cried. "He goes out with a crowd and when they're coming back he loses them. While he's alone he shoots down a Fokker single-seater that he finds out over the lines. Then what does he do? Does he come back like any ordinary he-man and report it? No. He's full of a lot of foolish notions about—about—Knights of the Round Table—" Higgins blushed for very shame at the mention of such childishness.

"Well, he's full of these crazy ideas," he went on, "like a moonstruck kid, and instead of reporting the ship he brought down he never says a word. And why?" The captain snorted his contempt. "Because he says it's too bad to shoot the poor wretches down, and he doesn't want any glory for it!"

Ken Durland frowned across Higgins' shoulder.

"But he did shoot down that plane," he pointed out. "I don't see why we need bother about his opinions as long as his record's so good."

"But the squardon!" blurted Higgins. "Isn't the squadron to get any credit? Are you going to let him get away with that?"

"Why not? Perhaps we place too much emphasis on the scoring, after all."

Immediately, by the indignant unbelief in Higgins' eyes, Durland saw that he had taken the wrong tack. Deftly he changed his tone.

"Bill," he said, "here are orders saying that we're to send over some of our men to fly with a Royal Flying Corps squadron, and they send over some of their men to fly with us—one of those brilliant staff projects to promote good will between the Allies. The C.O. over at Forty-Nine, R.F.C., doesn't like to break up his crowd for the purpose, and I don't like to break up ours, but we've both got to send over at least one man. Now why wouldn't King Arthur be the lad? Any of the other fellows would kick about leaving the squadron, but this lad would probably make any sacrifice for the cause."

Captain Higgins arose very slowly from the chair in which he sat facing his commander. He breathed a deep, portentous breath, and the scowl of irritation that had creased his brow slowly faded to a smile.

"Skipper," he said, "there isn't anything that'll keep a family from quarreling among themselves. But before I'm going to give one of my best men

away to the Limeys, you can put me down for insubordination. This crazy kid King Arthur is a member of Number Three Flight, Seventy-Seven Squadron, and no R.F.C. outfit is going to have him. That's how I feel."

Durland shook hands, smiling. Another crisis of command, it seemed, had passed. But the next morning the intrepid King Arthur heaped upon the strained back of Captain Higgins' endurance the last intolerable straw.

CHAPTER IX

Chivalry

CAPTAIN BILL'S flight had been out protecting a group of observers. The observers, finishing their job, turned back for home, leaving the Nieuports with a good deal of fuel in their tanks. Dismissed from duty the American pilots broke up, as was their habit, to seek trouble where they might, and Arthur found himself flying down the lines with Higgins at his side.

Finding no enemy air craft along the lines, they crossed into Allied territory and buzzed back toward their flying field. About two miles inside the lines they sighted a German two-seater. It was a Rumpler, droning its swift way homeward some two thousand feet below them.

Arthur glanced over at Higgins who flew closely beside him, and exchanged a remark in a sign language that both understood. Higgins grinned. Yes, he had seen the two-seater. Arthur continued his remarks.

"All yours, Chief," he signaled. "Take it!" And they started gliding down.

So far, the action that Arthur's chivalrous ideal prompted him to take was, in the eyes of the practical Higgins, eminently satisfactory. The Rumpler carried guns that were fixed, rigid, on the engine hood, and fired through the propeller as the Nieuport's gun did. Also, it carried a machine gun mounted on a swivel that was manned by an expert gunner who stood in the rear cockpit. Thus it was able to cover both front and rear. Its only blind spot was below and behind its wide-planed tail, and that was the deadly position that would be sought by the man who was to "take it."

In voluntarily giving that place to Higgins, King Arthur manifested all the idealism of his code, for it meant that Higgins would have the credit of the victory while Arthur must divert the German gunner's attention from Bill's attack. To do this he would dive from above, exposing himself to the enemy's fire.

As they started their downward glide they separated, and as soon as Higgins was safely away, Arthur began, with malice aforethought, to display the tactics of a novice. He circled in wavering spirals toward the slower body of the big two-seater, and by the deliberation of his approach gave it fair warning. He knew instantly that the German observer, with his machine gun ready, watched his er-

ratic tactics alertly—and completely missed the sight of a Nieuport that was even now passing, below and behind him, from his field of vision.

High above the German's stern, Arthur waited until Higgins was safely and snugly concealed under the Rumpler's tail. Then, at a signal from Higgins, Arthur attacked. He dived straight and suicidally at the observer, who took deliberate aim and started to fire. Seven thousand feet above the earth, in a flimsy plane, without a parachute, the chivalrous King Arthur earned his title. Deliberately he dived into that stream of smoking bullets, and as he did so, Higgins' Vickers shattered the air below with its raucous voice.

Instantly the German gunner and his pilot showed their caliber. The pilot banked in a great and unexpected swerve with the first sound of Bill's fire, and the observer swung his gun as though it were a pistol to catch Higgins in a snap shot that raked him from stem to stern. It was an astonishing exhibition of quick action and expert marksmanship. Arthur, seeing it, was amazed that he himself had lived through his own reckless dive.

As it was, he saw with consternation the downfall of his flight commander. Higgins, having missed his mark, was caught unawares by that quick swerve and the astonishing facility with which the observer used

his gun. He took it full in the body of his engine, and without volition swept downward on one wing, to find what landing he could in the shell-swept terrain below.

But the skillful, brilliant tactics of the Germans had taken their attention from the second Nieuport. Arthur dived, unscathed, beneath the Rumpler, and circled with lightning speed. He came out of his fantastic spiral under the enemy's tail. A perfect position. He fired upward at the black belly of the monstrous thing that had become in his eyes a dragon that must be slain. But his gun had not fired thrice before it jammed.

Frantically freeing his breech lock from the barrel, frantically forcing a jammed cartridge from the lock, he saw the dark enemy fall behind him and weave in an ominous circle away and below. He madly kicked his rudder, twisting for his turn, and the German gunner sent a stream of lead across his path.

But Arthur could fly. Beautifully he curvetted and twisted. Exquisitely he avoided the enemy's streaming fire while he regained a position behind and above the stunting Rumpler. Again he dived and fired, while the gunner, still using his machine gun with the ease of an automatic, filled the air with a weaving network of smoke from flying tracers.

And then, startlingly, Arthur—King Arthur—

found himself roaring downward upon an enemy who failed to touch his gun. The German gunner was standing in his cockpit, arms folded, while the empty belt of his gun flapped, useless, in the wind. His ammunition exhausted by encounters before he had met these two, the gallant German was inviting the last tribute of an enemy in war.

"Fire!" his hopeless bearing seemed to say. "Fire and have it over with!"

And Arthur—King Arthur—devoted to the chivalry of the ancient Round Table, could not fire. No longer was that monstrous, black-winged plane an impersonal and death-defying thing, a dragon to be slain for the good of the world. It had become a winged vehicle in which stood, with folded arms, a very gallant knight who invited death rather than surrender. . . . And King Arthur could not deal that death.

With a wave of one arm that was a greeting between one knight and another, Lieutenant Harry Arthur swept upward across his enemy's black form and turned his plane toward home.

CHAPTER X

Renfrew Gives Advice

CAPTAIN BILL HIGGINS returned to the home field just in time to be late for lunch, and because the squadron entertained a guest at the head of the table, he sat himself quietly at the foot so that he could slip away and see his companion of the morning's war after the meal was over. He found Arthur at the hangars, busily supervising the conditioning of his Nieuport.

"That was a game scrap, kid," grinned the big flight commander. "Thought I'd ruined the game when I let him cook me like he did. Thought you'd be wise and fly home. It was darned game of you to stand by and fight, even if you did lose him."

Arthur appeared slightly bewildered.

"Game?" he objected. "Lord, what else was there to do?"

"Well, a Rumpler isn't any dawg to kick aroun'," grinned Higgins. "Especially with a gunner at bat that can fire off the hip and hit a Nieuport. I was watching from down under and was pulling for you all the time. Thought he had you when your machine

gun jammed and you had to leave the party. Don't know why he didn't hit your tail. Fuel was low, I guess."

"He was out of ammunition," said Arthur quietly.

A subtle intonation in his voice rather than the words he spoke set Higgins rapidly to reviewing the fight as he had seen it.

"Out of ammunition, eh?" he repeated slowly. And then he found himself staring at Arthur with an unbelievable suspicion in his mind.

"And your gun?" he inquired incredulously. "It didn't jam?"

"No," Arthur shook his head. "No, it didn't jam."

For a moment Higgins stared blankly, then burst into a tirade.

"You let him go?" was the substance of his protest. "You had him with his ammunition gone, and you let him go?"

"What else?" cried Arthur. "You couldn't shoot down a defenseless man, could you? You couldn't do that yourself?"

"Oh, couldn't I?" Overwhelmed with uncomprehending rage, Higgins gave way once more to the unprintable.

"Let him go!" he cried bitterly. "Little King Arthur! Young Sir Galahad! Couldn't shoot down a swine who'd just shot down your own buddy—who

was carrying a bunch of pictures back to Germany! And your own squadron five planes behind the nearest record for the A.E.F.!"

Suddenly Arthur realized that Higgins couldn't understand. That the flight commander could never comprehend the impulse that had overpowered him in that moment when his enemy stood, exposed to his mercy, eight thousand feet above the earth. Hopelessly he turned away from the indignant captain.

"Have it your own way," he said, and left the astonished warrior consumed with wrath and resentment.

Ten minutes later an indignant flight commander burst into the headquarters hut of Seventy-Seven Squadron, briefly saluted Durland and the visiting officer who was with him, and broke forth at once into angry speech.

"It's the last straw!" he cried furiously. "That kid's looney! He's a drag on the whole squadron, Skipper! He's a quitter! If you can't get rid of the darned fool he'll disgrace the mob of us and get himself shot to boot!" Captain Higgins was indescribably agitated.

With an apologetic glance at his visitor, Ken Durland tried to placate the indignant officer.

"We can talk about it later," he offered.

"Not a minute later!" roared Higgins. "Either that kid gets out of my flight, or I resign!"

"What's he done?"

"Quit cold in the presence of the enemy!" cried Bill dramatically. The third person in Durland's little office arose to his feet at that, as any soldier would have done.

"Cowardice?" he asked.

Higgins looked him over—a tall, pleasant-faced young man in the uniform of a major of the Royal Flying Corps. A small rainbow of ribbons adorned his breast, and the wings of a pilot were spread above them. With the sudden realization that he had revealed a squadron weakness to the squadron commander of another service, Bill calmed down.

"No!" he confessed bluntly. "Not cowardice."

"Then how—" began Durland—and Higgins told his story. As he told it the indignation arose within him once more, and he ended it with hot recrimination.

"A fine gift to the Kaiser that was, wasn't it?" he cried. "Just to suit his own fool notions. He'd let down his own crowd, let the Huns take home pictures to help 'em kill the boys in the trenches, and gave 'em a two-seater complete with the nastiest shooting observer in their army, all to satisfy his own conceit. If I had my way, I'd get him a court."

"But if we keep him," suggested Durland, "we'll at least make life shorter for the Germans he meets whose ammunition lasts."

"He doesn't belong here!" Higgins' anger mounted. "He belongs in a young lady's seminary or a Sunday School social club. King Arthur? Sir Launcelot? A lot of attention Jerry's going to pay to such courtesies as that! If you're wise you'll can him!"

"You mean that?" demanded Durland.

"Do I mean it?" Bill's tone was an emphatic answer to his question.

"All right." Durland turned to the Flying Corps officer who stood at his side.

"Major Douglas Renfrew," he said, "meet Captain Higgins."

"Major Renfrew," Durland explained, "is commander of Squadron Forty-Nine, R.F.C. It is necessary for us to exchange an officer with him. Could you use a Knight of the Round Table, Major Renfrew?"

The tall young officer turned upon Higgins thoughtfully.

"We could use a squadron of them, Captain Durland," he said gravely. "But I'm afraid you'll regret losing one."

His eyes were still on Higgins—grave, pleasant

eyes that seemed extraordinarily serious about a point Higgins could not understand.

"I guess it would be a good way out," mumbled Bill uneasily. "He's certainly a queer sort of kid."

But he couldn't bring himself to break the news of the transfer to King Arthur. Ken Durland did that.

"It's in the nature of a diplomatic mission, really," explained Durland. "And it's important that we send the right man. You understand that, don't you?"

"No," said Arthur quietly. He stood in the headquarters office respectfully at attention, but there was in his eyes a singularly luminous gravity—a shadow that was not free of bitterness. "The fact is, Captain, I've made a mistake, I guess. I know Captain Higgins wants me out of his flight, and I expected he'd do something about that two-seater I let go. But I didn't think it would be—this. I didn't know they'd throw me out of the squadron."

"Hey! Wait a minute!" Durland was covered with confusion. "You're wrong! You're all wrong! You're going to Forty-Nine, and Renfrew's commanding it. Douglas Renfrew, M.C., D.S.O., and lord knows what other decorations. One of the keenest men in the R.F.C. He chose you, man! He picked you out of the whole darned squadron—"

"I leave for my new quarters to-night?" interrupted Arthur gently.

"Yes," Durland surrendered hopelessly. "But come back and see us occasionally."

"Good-by, sir!"

Solemnly the two shook hands.

"Good-by!"

And King Arthur was gone, with his dauntless courage, his high white idealism—and his lasting hurt.

Durland sat, pensive, in his office, remembering a thing that Renfrew had said, as they had made out the orders transferring Arthur from the squadron.

"You'll regret it, Captain. You'll want him back. A man that'll risk his life to spare an enemy will die to save a friend. There's not one like that in a thousand."

CHAPTER XI

Mort d'Arthur

FIVE days later, Higgins and Fraser of Number Three Flight, Seventy-Seventh Squadron, circled back and forth two thousand feet above a pair of R.E. Eights that were taking photographs below them. Higgins, warily alert, saw the fluffy white clouds gathering between him and the sun some twelve hundred feet above him, and was waiting for the woolly mass to continue on its way toward him until it was directly above. Then he would climb up and investigate it—use it, perhaps, as a screen. There were a great number of enemy planes active along the front these days.

Fraser opened fire with his machine gun while Higgins observed the clouds, and Bill turned to see three Fokker scouts approaching from the east. They were too close to give the Americans any time for maneuvering, and Captain Bill closed in above the R.E. Eights. As he did so, Fraser—cursing his own stupidity for having let them approach thus closely without challenge—fired again.

Two of the Germans were at Fraser's throat.

Furiously Bill pounced on the tail of the nearest.

The fight moved downward—five winged warriors who twisted and circled, dodged, turned, and spat at one another with smoking lead, until the German fighters had brought the battle down to the level of the two R.E. Eights. These, finding their precious photographs in danger, swung about, guns blazing, for a way home. And as they droned slowly through the flashing circles that the fighting scouts wove about them, twelve swift Fokkers swept roaring downward from the shelter of the woolly clouds that had gathered above. Trapped, the two-seaters and their escort saw the enemy sweep across their pathway to escape, and they knew they must fight their way through.

It was a running fight. Two slow R.E. Eights, dodging and twisting so that both pilot and observer might effectively use their guns; two flashing, fighting Nieuports streaking through the air in coolly calculated turns and twists that kept them always in touch with the two-seaters; and fourteen winged enemies that swept in, swept back to re-form, and filled the air with death as they swept in once more.

Then Fraser dropped, blazing, to his death, and two Fokkers followed, crazily, scattering splinters in the air as one broke into débris.

A flight of S.E.'s, homeward bound, saw the battle

and joined in. Among them was one that bore not only the symbol of Squadron Forty-Nine, R.F.C., but the red comet of Seventy-Seven. The S.E.'s attacked with the advantage of a downward plunge from above the enemy's rear. Thirteen Fokkers now, against one Nieuport and five S.E.'s to defend the slow two-seaters.

In a burst of flame a circling Fokker fell. That was the work of the strange red comet of Forty-Nine. Like an infuriated dragon, it winged its way among the enemy planes.

Another Fokker down, and two S.E.'s drifting earthward from the battle. The protecting circle about the two-seaters was broken as the odds became heavy again. Three scouts against eleven—but the two-seaters continued their weaving progress toward the lines, their gunners firing a brave defiance against the enemy. And six Fokkers darted away to re-form in a fanwise line about a vivid orange leader.

Higgins saw them sweep down. Saw them plunge through the broken defenses, and then saw the orange enemy execute a singular maneuver. He turned away from the dive, the orange leader did, and as he circled about behind his diving comrades, one of his pilots flew blindly at the bows of an S.E. Five. The Five turned to avoid collision at the exact moment the orange plane finished its circle and came out of it

on the S.E.'s tail. A single burst of fire and the S.E. went veering down, while the Fokkers withdrew to re-form that fanwise line.

Higgins saw this, and realized as he saw it that the flashing figure of that orange plane had been hot on the tail of every S.E. that had dropped. In a great surge of rage he swung away from his place above the two-seaters to meet the dive of the Fokkers. And then he realized that another had seen the same thing that he had seen. The S.E. Five with the red comet on its fuselage was sweeping about in a great circle that would bring it into the fan formation of the enemy. Bill breathed relief—that maneuver had taken the orange leader's attention from him. In all probability it had saved his life.

The formation broke, and six Fokkers vied with one another to bring down that audacious red comet. But the S.E. ignored them. Straight as a die it flew for the orange leader. In a hail of shot it dived in, and started firing as it came within fifty yards of the German ace.

A short burst—and then silence. Gun jammed or ammunition gone. With a leap upward the red comet cleared the orange Fokker, but did not give up the fight. With a beautiful half roll, it turned back—straight into the face of the enemy.

Higgins, all else forgotten, saw that lovely turning,

and saw the deadly meaning of its pilot. With a gush of sick horror he saw the two planes crash. The red comet and the orange Fokker, one ghastly mass of wreckage, hung for a moment, suspended in the air.

Then they fell, and for an instant Bill was blind and nerveless as the horror flashed from his sight. With a great cry, he dashed at the nearest Fokker plane. But it sped from him. It ran away. Ten Fokkers were running away, and the fight was over.

Higgins sped home and wildly called over the telephone for Squadron Forty-Nine. The voice of Major Renfrew answered him.

"Who was that pilot?" The voice of Captain Higgins was hoarse with dread. "That pilot with the red comet on his ship? I saw him—I saw him—who was it?"

"I know," said the voice of Renfrew. "I know. We've got the report in here. It was your man, with the red comet. Arthur, you know. Lieutenant Arthur."

Bill Higgins stared glassily at a picture on the wall.

"He took it!" he whispered into the phone. "For me. He gave his life for mine! What a—what a way for a man to die!"

"Yes," came the firm voice of Renfrew. "Mag-

nificent, wasn't it? And no pain, you know." The voice was very gentle. "There was no pain. He never felt hurt—again."

. . . . .

All of which helps to explain the order that was received in the summer of 1921 by a French stone mason in a little village near the old-time battle lines. It was a queer order, issued by an American gentleman named Higgins who desired a white cross of marble to stand in the nearby cemetery of American soldier dead. Queer, that is, for an American. The stone mason had not known before that such titles were borne by Americans. Still, it was an order, and he must carve his inscriptions as the orders warranted. So he carved, upon a flawless piece of white Carrara marble, the following inscription:

ERECTED BY A FRIEND
FOR WHOM DIED
ARTHUR
A VERY PERFECT KNIGHT.

CHAPTER XII

Wild Man Flint

THE voice of headquarters sounded, cool and impersonal, in the receiver, and yet Durland detected in it an inflection of something akin to pity.

"You're building up a good unit, Captain," the voice acknowledged, "and it seems a shame to unload this on you. But I think you're the best man to handle it."

Durland smiled into the mouthpiece.

"I'm handling anything you send over, sir," he answered recklessly. "But may I ask what it is you're unloading?"

"It's in your orders for to-morrow!" The voice of authority became peremptory. "We're switching Lieutenant Flint to Seventy-Seven Squadron. It's a problem for you to handle."

Captain Kenneth Durland hung up the receiver very seriously. Very seriously he turned to Bill Higgins who sat across the table making out orders of operation.

"Bill," he anounced gravely. "I've got some bad news for you and Flight Number Three."

"Don't get you," confessed Bill, frankly.

"Name of Flint," explained Durland. "They're passing the buck over at Ninety-Three and Flint joins us to-morrow. I'm putting him in your flight. A nice little playmate for you."

Bill Higgins groaned.

"That wild man?" he cried in consternation. "What have we ever done to draw a guy like that? He'll fit into Seventy-Seven like a tick at a cattle man's convention. They say he coöperates only when alone, steps out when his squadron is flying and wages war against commanding officers only. Last time he flew over the lines was at the exact moment he was down for a disciplinary interview with his major, and the last time Ninety-Three went up on offensive patrol he left the formation to keep a date with a girl at Toul. Flint's got all the squadron spirit of that horse they're serving for lunch at the mess."

Ken Durland didn't laugh. The insubordination of Lieutenant Flint, proverbial throughout the Air Service, was no laughing matter. Flint had shown a vitriolic opposition to all discipline and order. Every commanding officer at the front had foreseen for Flint nothing but court-martial and disgrace. That he should be shifted to another squadron had occurred to none of them. That he was, in fact, now

shifted to Seventy-Seven was a calamity that filled Ken Durland, who had pride in the spirit of his squadron, with dark foreboding.

"I'll run over to Ninety-Three and get the story," he said finally. "It might have been a personal feud between Flint and the C.O. They say that when Flint does scrap, he's some scrapper, and he may work all right with us."

"As long as you don't give him any orders," mourned Higgins, pessimistically.

Durland drove over to Ninety-Three through a ground fog that murkily shrouded the world, and he thought as he rode how he might tactfully deal with Flint's outraged erstwhile commander. But the interview profited him nothing.

"The man's just plain ornery, that's all," scowled Major Harkness of Ninety-Three, who added a pleasant southern personality to a fine record as commander. "We just didn't do anything but treat the boy right, and he ricked up his back and like to chewed mah hand off."

"But why? I mean what was his motive? Was he yellow? Scared to fly?"

"*No,* suh!" Harkness was positive about that. "The boy has guts. But he's jus' mean. Hates the whole world, that boy does. He fought discipline all through the gunnery school. He jus' deviled me, an'

deviled me, like he wanted a court-martial more than anything else."

"Why didn't you give it to him?"

Major Harkness grinned, his dark eyes flashing.

"Because I suspicioned it might be jus' what he wanted, an' devilin' ain't no way to get anything out of *me*. Then I told him I'd transfer him to another outfit. And he snarled right up. 'All right,' he says, 'switch me. Switch me to Twenty-Four. They got men over there.' Flint always was a lot friendly over at Twenty-Four. Flew over there when he was supposed to be out on duty. . . . Anyway, I switched him."

"But why pick on me?"

Again Harkness grinned.

"Because you're the only outfit in this area outside of Twenty-Four," he admitted. "Anyway, headquarters thought you might be the man to handle him. Maybe you are. Ah certainly wish you luck, Cap'n Durland."

Which was all the satisfaction Durland got. The feeling was heavy upon him as he drove back to his field, that it must be a queer, mean cuss who couldn't coöperate with the gallant Major Harkness. Arriving at the field, he proceeded immediately to his orderly hut, and was still standing at his table, glancing over accumulated documents, when the door snapped

smartly open, and a strange officer stood in the doorway.

"Captain Durland?" asked the stranger. "Lieutenant Flint reports, sir."

For a moment Durland was held speechless by a peculiar quality in the eyes of the newcomer. Then:

"Come in and sit down," he invited, shaking Flint's hand. Seating himself at the table, he studied the wild man of Ninety-Three.

Flint was tall and well knit, with a rangy form that spoke of large reserves in nerve and muscle. His slightly freckled face had that beautiful complexion that girls spend money for, and the gleam of copper that shone in his brows was repeated in the close-cropped hair above. But it was his eyes that held Ken Durland's attention. They were an almost violent blue, and they flashed with a curious effect of malevolence.

"I suppose you've found your quarters, and met some of the boys?" ventured Durland pleasantly.

"Sure," Flint's thin, rather finely shaped lips threw out the word as though contemptuously. "But what I wanted to see you about, Captain Durland, is this. They've given me a ship." A defiant blue flame flashed in his eyes as he spoke. "And I want to fly it. I want to take it up. Captain Higgins objects, so I came to you."

The blunt, uncompromising manner of the request and the impassioned glance with which Flint delivered it, caused a little prickle of irritation to creep up Durland's spine. His voice became chilly.

"Captain Higgins probably feels that it would be a needless risk of a machine and pilot to fly with this fog on the ground. Why do you want to go up?"

Twisting his thin lips into something like a snarl, and tossing his head over one shoulder in a gesture of impatience and disgust, Flint became contemptuous.

"Want to get used to the ship," he explained. "You'll be sending me over the lines to-morrow, and I want to know my machine."

In response to the defiant insolence in Flint's voice, anger and resentment tugged at Durland's self-control.

"You will be given an opportunity to try out your machine before flying over the lines," he said curtly.

The blue eyes blazed furiously.

"Is that all?" demanded Flint.

"That's all," snapped Durland. "No flying to-day."

Flint strode from the orderly room with the lithe movement of a panther, and Durland, left alone, wondered at the hot anger that the newcomer's insolence had aroused in him. The man was a fool, he reflected. Or could it be that Flint was something

more difficult than a fool? Surely no sane man would so deliberately ask for trouble. There were cases of men whose minds had broken under the strain of war.

Durland's reflections were interrupted by a blast of sound. Over at the sheds some one was running up an engine. Durland leaped to the door. Could it be possible that the maniac Flint was risking his life to defy the order against flying?

Durland ran from the orderly room and hurried toward the flying line. As he did so, he saw Higgins and some others of the squadron also making for the Nieuport that droned at the tarmac, but before any of them reached the spot, it skimmed lightly out onto the field, roared into the wind with the full throat of its engine, and rose from the earth to disappear into the heavy mist.

"Who was that pilot?" demanded Durland wrathfully.

"Mr. Flint, sir," cried the mechanic. "He said he had your orders."

"My orders!" Ken Durland swung away from the perturbed man and faced the approaching Higgins. "I doubt if that maniac will trouble you again, Bill," he said, grimly calm. "Nothing but bull luck will ever bring him down in this fog without crashing."

CHAPTER XIII

Flint Turns Tail

BUT the crash, it developed, was not a fatal one. Flint wasn't even seriously injured. The news came in before evening that he had pancaked in the fog on the aërodrome of the Twenty-Fourth Squadron, and blackened both his eyes at the same time as he washed out his machine.

"Give Mr. Flint my compliments," said Durland over the telephone, "and instruct him to report back at this field immediately."

Durland almost relented when he saw the delinquent pilot dismount from the tender that brought him back to the field that evening. Flint's eyes were both badly bruised, and a fat bandage across his nose gave his face an appearance of comic pathos. But the truant's first words killed any commiseration that Durland might have felt for him.

"Boy," Bill Higgins had exclaimed, in greeting, "you've got a horseshoe! Only fool's luck would let a man land a Nieuport in fog and get off with a bunged-up eyelid."

"And only another fool would drag a man back

for duty after a crash like that!" Flint cried surprisingly and venomously.

The insolent complaint killed in Captain Durland all the unaffected good fellowship that had won him a reputation for never asserting vain authority. Completely ignoring Flint, he addressed himself coldly to Bill Higgins.

"Instruct Mr. Flint to report immediately to the headquarters hut!" he snapped. "I want to speak to him."

With the bandaged criminal before him, and Higgins at the table making notes, Durland faced the first crisis in his taming of Wild Man Flint.

"Can you tell me why you deliberately disobeyed orders and took that plane off on a joy ride this afternoon?" he demanded.

"No, I can't!" was the surprising answer, and through the bruised, swollen lids, the blue eyes blazed with unabated fury. "I tried to tell you once, and you were too dumb to understand, so I'm not going to try again."

"You mean that you wanted to try out your ship?"

"That's what I said."

"But you don't look so foolish. Any kid in the ground school could tell you that you can't land a Nieuport in fog."

"You, I suppose, haven't even cracked up a ship on a clear day?" sneered Flint.

Durland resolutely choked down his wrath.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Flint," he said coolly. "I could get you a court for this, or I could hand you a pretty humiliating punishment; but you seem to have more nerve than brains, so I won't do either. I'll just naturally take you up with the morning patrol and teach you how to fly."

The blue eyes snapped vitriol at him through their bruises.

"Fly? Over the lines? Like this?" It was an accusation rather than a complaint.

"You won't be like that in the morning," continued Durland smoothly, "because you're going to spend the night at the dressing station having cold compresses applied to your eyes. Captain Higgins!" He turned upon Bill and was delighted at the smartness with which that warrior snapped to attention. "You will take this officer over to the dressing station in person, and he will continue there under arrest until you call for him in time for early patrol in the morning. You understand?"

"Yes, sir!" Bill wheeled upon Flint, indicating the door. But it seemed that the wild man had something more to say.

"You needn't have played soldier about it," he

sneered. "I was flying in the morning, anyway, orders or no orders. There isn't anything would have kept me down!"

He followed Bill Higgins from the hut.

Frowning, Durland turned to his work at the table. The outlook, it seemed, was not promising. His first encounter with this new and extraordinary problem in the commanding of men indicated heavy weather to come. He shook his head vigorously, dismissed from his mind a matter that distracted him from the work in hand, and turned resolutely to his business. A light tap sounded on the door.

"Come!" he cried.

The door opened and a slight young man, bearing the wings of a pilot and the bar of a first lieutenant, entered and approached his table.

"I'm Kearney," he said in a quiet, pleasant voice. "Tim Kearney from over at Twenty-Four. I came over in our tender with Lieutenant Flint, sir."

Durland examined the youth, and he found something in the pleasant gray eyes and snubbed face of Lieutenant Kearney that subdued the irritation he had felt at the first mention of the squadron that so attracted the insubordinate Flint.

"Anything I can do for you, Mr. Kearney?" he asked.

"Well," smiled the visitor. "It's just like this.

The boys over at Twenty-Four are sorry that Bill cracked up on our field, and they'll be asking me how he came out of it. I thought if you'd give me a line on what you meant to do about it, it would help me answer questions."

Again the irritation arose in Durland's mind. He felt it was officious and tactless of this youngster to probe his disciplinary methods.

"You tell your friends," he said coldly, "that Mr. Flint is none the worse for his accident. He will fly in the early patrol to-morrow morning. That's all!"

But the youngster hesitated, crestfallen.

"Fly in the morning?" he cried. Then, conscious of Durland's cold regard, "Thank you, sir," he finished, and left the hut. Durland felt slightly sheepish as he saw him go. He found it hard to be unfriendly.

When Flint reported for flying in the morning, his face was only slightly disfigured by the marks of his crash, and his blue eyes shone inscrutably. Durland, watching him stride with that lithe, firm tread to the Nieuport that was allotted him, liked the way Flint slid into his machine, and the cool, confident deftness with which he examined his gear, tested his controls and inspected lock and feed belt of his guns.

Higgins and three other pilots of Seventy-Seven were also watching the wild man curiously and keenly, trying to appraise him, but Flint went about

his business as though they didn't exist. With his engine turning over, warmed up and ready for service, he turned at the flying line and waited for the movement to take the air. Finally, when Bill trundled out onto the field, Flint followed decorously behind him and taxied into position to the right of Higgins' wing. Durland took his place behind Higgins to the left, and he was still studying Flint's prancing and bobbing ship as it kicked about dimly in the dust of the dawn take-off, when Bill Higgins fired his signal.

With a roar of exultant power the six motors disappeared in the whirls of their centrifugal effort. Only the flaming rings of the exhausts betrayed the power by which the six lumbering planes became soaring birds in the murky air of dawn.

Durland, having chosen a strategic position, kept his eye on the dainty streamline of Flint's machine as it soared in the air to his right. It was as though Flint had been swallowed by that flying plane, had become part of it, its brains and personality. All Durland could see of the man was a begoggled head, motionless, at the cockpit; but the plane, with its red comet painted on its fuselage, was Flint. Durland would not let it escape him, come what might.

As the dun earth became a dark carpet beneath them, and as the thin streak of silver, which from

the ground had lined the east, became a broadening band of gold, Flint still maintained his position, a part of the formation, an integral unit of a coöperating flight.

Higgins had climbed steadily ever since leaving the ground and he still climbed as they passed over the lines. Durland saw Flint falter in his climb, saw the plane that was Flint bob downward below him as Flint faltered. Instantly he, too, ducked, swinging slightly to the right, but Flint almost immediately zoomed, and zooming also, Durland returned with him to their proper level above Higgins.

Higgins had taken a level keel, now, and was turning in a wide circle, down the line. That put Flint on the outside of the turn. A good chance to lose himself. But Durland, watching, saw Flint follow the turn. Eight thousand feet below them, four bulbous observation balloons marked the German line.

Then, suddenly, Higgins swung east and was climbing again. As he turned, Higgins waved an arm, and Durland, reading the signal, forgot Flint to search the skies for the enemy. He saw them, a group of ghostly shapes skimming through clouds to the north. Seven of them, Durland counted, and Higgins was trying to pass them unobserved and

climb into the sun as he did so. In a few minutes the flight was wheeling about to the north, circling the enemy planes. Durland, keeping his place on an outside curve, intent upon the maneuvers whereby Bill would approach the enemy, forgot Flint, forgot ground and air and sky. Seventy-Seven was wheeling into battle.

The Germans had doubled back, climbing. Too late they had seen the enemy—and Bill Higgins led his flight down in a beautiful, curving dive. With the wind stiff against taut fabrics the Nieuports swept down, and as they did so, Durland discovered that Flint had gone—had left the formation as it flew into combat.

There was no time to think of that now; and yet he did—in the heat of mad action the thought persisted—Flint had run away. A German plane was bobbing in his gunsight, a shred of cloud between. It swerved, as he fired, to the right, and looped. Instantly he swung to the left, twisted, half rolled, and came out of it on the German's tail. Gunfire. His own gun blazing at the flying mark, and another gun —behind him. A maniac chatter, and bullets ticking at his fabric,—and that persistent thought: Flint, a man of Seventy-Seven—one of his ace men. . . .

His quarry ducked, shot into the air and whisked

about to come at him from an angle. And the tracers were making a net of smoke about him.

He veered to meet the enemy at a slight angle, glimpsing from the tail of his eye the man who fired from behind. He had a second to fire across the first man's nose before colliding with him. A second to avoid the death that closed in from behind. Coolly, grinning with the grim fatalism of a hundred encounters, he fired and gambled on a zoom. Beneath him two German planes crashed in ghastly collision, their bodies melting into a flame-colored mass of débris. He saw, he felt and acted through it all with the remembrance like a specter in his mind. The squadron had a new man among its pilots—and he was yellow.

CHAPTER XIV

The Truth About Flint

DURLAND found himself alone in the sky. His fight had been a running fight—running at more than one hundred miles an hour. The rest of the flight might be a mile or twenty miles from him. He continued to circle, scanning the murky skies. The weather was closing in. A red dawn would be followed by a dark, inactive day. He saw nothing in the skies about him or above him.

He studied the air below. There, very close beneath him, were the German trenches; the balloons. And there—gunfire! Planes fighting down there below! A sudden red billow of flame splashed forth in the murk beneath. One of the balloons had gone up. Of course, that was the flight. There were the men of Seventy-Seven. Bringing down balloons. Grinning, he dived madly for earth.

He came out of his dive considerably behind the lines and flew toward the nearest balloon at a two-thousand-foot level. As he approached it he saw another burst of flame. Down the line another balloon had gone up, and an insane chatter from the

ground accompanied a hail of machine-gun fire. Then he saw two planes speeding across his vision—the two who were doing the shooting.

"Great work, boys!" he yelled into the roar of his motor; but his heart was heavy with anxiety, for balloon strafing was the most dangerous form of warfare in the air.

"Seventy-Seven down the line!" he roared as he sped toward them. And then he swallowed his words. The first plane coming bore the sunburst symbol of Squadron Twenty-Four. He was mistaken. No. The second was right. The second plane carried the comet. All right, one of each, and one more of Seventy-Seven to share the risk!

All this in an instant. All this in a blaze of tense, swift thought. And then he was roaring in to attack the balloon with them; but as he did so, the other red comet veered away from the attack, and out of the tail of his eye he saw the reason—four Albatross scouts sailing in from the east to attack them.

As Durland closed on the balloon in a hail of ground fire, the sunburst plane of Squadron Twenty-Four faltered, veered, and Durland saw it gliding down across No-Man's Land as he poured his fire into the envelope, zoomed above it, and felt the tug of ground fire in his flying suit. The stricken balloon flamed behind him.

The Twenty-Fourth Squadron plane was down. That left two Seventy-Sevens to scrap the Albatross scouts. He circled, climbing, following the sound of firing that indicated where that single red comet had engaged the four Albatross scouts. He found them by the blazing signal of an Albatross going down in flames. The Nieuport was loping away from its victim, and two Albatross planes were separating in a peculiarly beautiful evolution that would bring them back to close in on either flank of the Nieuport.

The Nieuport came out of its loop. The third Albatross circled just above. Durland saw the danger, but he was a thousand yards away when the red comet straightened out.

Like a hawk it swerved to pounce, head-on, at one Albatross, ignoring the other's fire. Pitifully its victim fell away to break up in the air. Unscathed, the red comet pounced upon the third Albatross still ignoring the second, which fired bursts upon him whenever it could find a point of vantage. Durland, sweeping about to engage that enemy, saw his brother-in-arms soar away into a loop as his third victim went tumbling down.

After that Durland was no more than observer. The remaining Albatross strove vainly to twist and fight its way back to the east, but it could do nothing

against a foe who ignored its fire. In a moment, it, too, went flaming down.

Astounded and exultant at the magnificent courage and skill he had witnessed, Durland took advantage of his nearness to the victorious pilot to close in on him and wave congratulations as they turned toward the lines. His ship almost touching the wing of the other, he swept one arm about his head in exaggerated greeting, whereupon the victorious pilot of his squadron swept off his goggles and turned upon him the vitriolic anger of Flint's blazing blue eyes.

Astonished by the discovery of the pilot's identity, and amazed at the unmistakable fury in Flint's eyes, Durland almost locked wings with him. Swerving away to avoid catastrophe, he lost Flint under his wing. When he evened out again, and searched for his amazing companion, he discovered him gliding to earth just beyond the British trenches.

Thoroughly mystified, Durland circled over the gliding Nieuport and saw it touch the ground, bounce helplessly, and subside in a crazy heap. He saw Flint scramble out of the wreckage and hurry away from his machine. Then he saw another ship, neatly landed in a field nearby. He saw Flint hastily approach this machine only to veer away from it and almost run toward the group of soldiers that had

gathered about his wreck. Very thoughtfully Durland straightened out and flew back to his field.

Bill Higgins and the other members of the flight had, it seemed, landed before him and were anxiously awaiting his return.

"Well," Bill cried in greeting. "Now you know the truth. Your wild man from Ninety-Three's yellow as a Chicago taxi!"

"Oh, no!" grinned Durland warmly, and he told Bill Higgins what he had seen that morning. Bill stood stricken speechless for a moment.

"Four of 'em!" he gasped at last. "Four of 'em all at once!"

"Sure, four of 'em, and three or four balloons."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to get a staff car and run right down to that field they landed in. I want to shake that man by the hand!" cried Ken Durland, stripping off his helmet as he made for the motor park.

It was after noon before they returned, Captain Durland and his obstreperous pilot sitting together, but silent, in the rear seat of the car. Flint jumped out and proceeded almost immediately to his quarters, while his brother officers gazed at him, silent, but respectful. Durland hurried into the orderly hut.

Bill Higgins, following his commander into the hut, found him sitting, phone in hand, waiting for a con-

nection. As Bill entered he spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Have 'em call me as soon as possible," he said and hung up.

"Well," demanded Bill. "What does he get? A court-martial or a citation?"

"Neither," grinned Durland. "All he gets is Tim Kearney from Twenty-Four. Or else"—the glint of battle shone in Durland's eye—"or else we have to send Flint over there. And that's one thing I don't aim to do."

"What, for the love of Mike?" cried Bill.

"It's like this," explained his commander. "All that's been the matter with this scrapping fool, Flint, is that he's bound to be with his pal, Tim Kearney, and circumstances, combined with his hot head, have kept them apart. Tim Kearney's the brother of Flint's girl back home. They were brought up as kids together, and he promised Tim's sister to stand by the kid. The fuss started when they got separated at gunnery school. Tim went to one camp, Flint to another. Right away Flint started flying over to visit his pal—to live up to his promise to keep an eye on him. His first C.O. was a confounded martinet and wouldn't give him permission so he got mad and flew over anyway. That brought discipline. Flint flew off the handle and fought it. He fought

like blazes because that's the only way he knows of getting anything. Obstacles rouse him to blue fury. Well, he fought to get into the same service squadron with Kearney, but Tim went to Twenty-Four, and he was sent to Ninety-Three.

"Again Flint started making visits with or without permission, and sneaking off to join Kearney in his fighting. Again he got into trouble, and again he tried to fight his way into Kearney's squadron. When they shifted him over here he was mad clean through. By that time he hated all authority. He flew over to Twenty-Four last night in spite of orders, learned that Kearney was down for balloon strafing in the morning, and left our formation to join him. I found him in the trenches with Kearney, planning mutiny and rebellion, while Kearney, with a broken ankle, calmed him down. I got the story out of both of them, called up H.Q. right from there, and I think I've fixed it. We want the pair of 'em over here with us. Hello, Flint!"

The door had opened to admit the tall form of Flint. A subdued and quiet Flint with a strange diffidence in his astonishingly deep blue eyes.

"Flint," cried Bill Higgins, rising nobly to the occasion. "It was great! It was magnificent! We're darned proud of you, old man!"

He shook the silent wild man's hand. The telephone bell tinkled and Flint stiffened.

He paced up and down the little floor space while Durland spoke and listened at the phone, and there lurked in his eyes a flicker of the blue flame that had ever betrayed the fury of combat he could not control.

"O.K." Durland snapped down the receiver.

"He's coming?" The cry burst from Flint with a ring of gladness.

"Reports here to-morrow," said Durland. "I'm darned glad, Flint. The boys will be glad."

Which was a fact that Flint soon found out, because they were waiting for him in the mess hut to tell him so.

CHAPTER XV

A Spy in Camp!

KEN DURLAND received the letter on a hot afternoon in July. He took Pennock into his confidence about it. Pennock always remembered the date because on that same day he had stripped the fabric from one wing while in flight over Balinville—and he always remembered stripping his wing because it happened the same day as the letter was received. No sooner had he brought the wounded plane down to a gentle landing than Durland came out to meet him. Durland looked worried and acted mysteriously.

"Got a minute?" Durland asked.

But Pennock was properly stirred by his adventure.

"See that landing?" he exclaimed. "Fabric all shot! Flapping off the struts like city hall bunting two weeks after the parade! And I nursed her in!"

"Good enough," said Durland. "But I've got a letter here—"

"Good enough!" echoed Pennock. "My gosh! All I did was save one lousy machine and a second rate pilot from a crash. And you call it good enough!

Say, what's in that letter anyway? Is the war over?"

"No. It's just got a new start as far as we're concerned. Come here."

Durland ducked with an exaggerated air of mystery into the shelter of an alcove formed by two hangars. After carefully assuring himself that no one was within earshot or sight, he extracted from his breast pocket a crumpled sheet of paper and gave it to Pennock.

Inasmuch as the enemy is without doubt informed regarding every movement of aircraft in this sector, we have reason to believe there is a serious leak. A careful investigation has revealed that the enemy is especially well posted on the movements of the Seventy-Seventh Aëro Squadron, which you command. This leads us to believe that the leak has its source in your command. Please do everything you can in the way of undercover investigation of this condition, and in the meantime expect to receive a representative from these headquarters whom you will give every coöperation.

"See what that means?" questioned Durland in an agitated voice. "It means that there's a spy somewhere here in the squadron. Some darned skunk who's selling out to the enemy. Who he is or how he works, God knows. It may be any officer or man in the outfit!"

"It might be me," suggested Pennock, gravely.

Durland flung back his head impatiently.

"You're the only man who's been in it as long as I have," he said, "and I don't see how I can trust any one else!"

"Hmm." Pennock studied the matter gravely. "You don't suppose Higgins, or—"

"Not consciously, of course," agreed Durland. "But a lot of our new flyers are meat for spies. We've got to check up on the people they know in the village; the girls they dance with; the civilians they step around with. Any one may fall for the game of a good smooth spy!"

Pennock realized that it was so. The spy menace was a constant one. A spy could be the boy who polished your shoes on the village square, the girl who danced with you at the hospital hop, the old, fat waiter who talked flying with you at the seedy village inn; even the old lady who pottered about the sitting room of the inn and talked endlessly but sweetly of her boy who had flown in the Lafayette Escadrille—suspicious, that. He ought to have thought of that before. The fellows spoke pretty freely with that old lady. . . .

The more Pennock thought of it the more clearly he realized the excellent opportunities a spy might have for gaining information from the carefree, talkative young pilots of Seventy-Seven.

"We'll have to study the village life," Pennock admitted.

"And keep it dark," added Durland. "Nobody must suspect what we're doing."

"Mustn't let her know," said Pennock.

"Her! You've got a hunch?" Durland was obviously startled.

"Only a suspicion. That old lady down at the inn —Madame Pannel, she's called. She's always talking about her boy who was killed with the Lafayette Escadrille. That loosens the boys up and they talk pretty freely with her."

"But that's natural enough. If her son flew with the Escadrille—"

"But did he? She's French, and the Escadrille was made up of Americans, wasn't it?"

Durland emitted a soft hum of understanding.

"Guess she'll stand watching, all right," he admitted. "We'll have to check up on her story."

"To-night," said Pennock, "I'll go down to the village and pump her."

"Shucks!" Durland was pondering the situation. "Look here, Penny! There's the vegetable dealer down on the church corner. He's always toasting the boys in his back room; and that old boy at the *estaminet*. Looks as if we'll have to check up on the whole village."

"Guess it would help if we could go to some one who knows the villagers from way back. How about the priest?"

"Better than that. There's old Frandupont up at the château. He's given up most of his fortune to the war. Bet he'd give his right arm to help us. I'll look him up to-night."

CHAPTER XVI

The Man in the Hangar

THAT evening Pennock hung around the aërodrome for some time after supper was over. It was a dark, clear night, and, for most of the squadron, a free one. Durland had gone off to dine with Monsieur Frandupont at the château. There was a dance at the hospital and Higgins was holding a flight supper at the inn. Also, there was a concert booked for the mechanic's band, and some boxing at the Y hut. By the time Pennock had shut his book and strolled forth, the aërodrome was a pretty lone place.

It was that silence, combined with his newly awakened suspicions, that led him to halt, startled, at a sight and sound that at any other time he would have passed without suspicion. The sound was that of a movement in Number Three hangar, and the sight was that of an electric flashlight playing on the wing of a plane inside the hangar.

Pennock froze on the concrete strip outside and watched through the window. He finally made out the form of a man silhouetted against the flashlight, and he was able to see the number of the plane upon

which the light fell—6544—Higgins' ship. Then the light was reflected from the bright blade of a knife, and Pennock drew his breath sharply. The man was cutting the fabric! Carefully, deliberately, he was slitting the fabric on the wing of Bill's machine!

Pennock's first impulse was to leap into the hangar and take the spy red-handed. He controlled it. Mustn't give the game away. This man was an agent, and he must be used to lead them to the principal—to the big boy up above. That was the trick!

For a long moment Pennock stood there, trying to identify the secret worker. He struggled to identify in his mind the occasional glimpse he obtained of the man's gaunt silhouetted face, or the hunched body; but he couldn't see enough.

Then a scheme occurred to him. He might trap the man.

With infinite caution Pennock edged away from the hangar window, off the concrete strip, until his feet were on soft loam. Then, stealthily, he crept to the roadway that would take him past the hangar's open mouth. He went on back along the road toward the mess hut, keeping the hangar in view so that the criminal couldn't escape him. Then he started briskly down the road, whistling a tune, as though he had just emerged from the mess hut.

"Just a Baby's Prayer at Twilight," he whistled

gayly, as his heels clicked smartly on the concrete leading past the mouth of Number Three hangar. And, sure enough, a lone figure emerged from the black maw of the shed as he approached it.

"Luck!" cried Pennock. "Got a light, Sergeant?"

"Yessir!"

Pennock stood close to the man and fumbled with his pipe until the man felt himself compelled to light the match and hold it to the bowl.

"Putting the ships to bed?" Pennock had identified the man now, and his bluff question covered mingled horror and triumph. Kahlen! Corporal Kahlen, who had joined the squadron a month before!

"No, sir!" the man said, more loudly, Pennock thought, than was necessary. "Just stopped in to get my cap, sir. Left it in the hangar this afternoon."

"Well, thanks for the light," said Pennock.

He walked on, the horror and the triumph contending inside him. Before he turned from the concrete toward the village road he glanced back, and the triumph died, for in the spot where he had left the single dark shape of Corporal Kahlen there now stood two dark shapes.

The impulse to walk back again was overcome by the realization that to do so would arouse an indelible suspicion of his purpose. He decided instead to con-

sult Durland at once and decide with him upon a plan of action.

He walked to the village and there obtained a dispatch rider from Transport who ran him out to the château of old Frandupont.

CHAPTER XVII

Murder Marks the Trail

THE château was an ancient stone structure that stood in the midst of a wooded park. The thick and venerable woods seemed to cast a dark cloak around the old gray buildings, and Pennock entered the grounds feeling that he was intruding in a world that had stopped progressing in a long departed age.

When the very old butler, who swung the oaken doors for him, led him through a tapestried corridor into the great dining hall, the feeling came upon him that only courtesy and gallantry and gracious manners could possibly exist in the grand spaces of the room he entered.

Durland was there with Monsieur Frandupont, the thin old aristocrat who was his host. They were sitting over their coffee at one end of a great oaken table, and both arose to greet Pennock heartily.

"Monsieur Frandupont is encouraging, Penny," said Durland, as their host ordered coffee and wine for the newcomer. "He feels there won't be any difficulty about running down the spy."

"Ah, no!" exclaimed the old nobleman. "But it

will not be so easily done as you might think. I know the village, Messieurs. I know it, like you say, a book, and I am not surprise that you come to me. I have notice many things. Black things, my young gentlemen. There have strange people come to this village. I have notice them."

"But it isn't in the village, alone," said Pennock gravely. "They're closer to home than that. We've got at least one spy in the squadron, Ken."

"No!"

It was a cry of deep protest that came from Durland's heart. And Frandupont was almost equally affected. He leaned forward across the table, his face looking keenly, sympathetically at the squadron commander.

"I was coming out through the hangars," Pennock explained to his intent listeners. And he told them of what he had seen.

"Splitting the fabric!" gasped Durland. "Then your ship this afternoon—"

"Had been fixed," agreed Pennock grimly.

"But who was it?" demanded Durland. "You saw him?"

Pennock nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I saw him."

Monsieur Frandupont's lips parted.

"Oh!" he cried. "You know who it is?"

Pennock paused, considering.

"He was—" he said slowly, and again paused.

"Who?" demanded the old man.

"Corporal Kahlen," said Pennock.

"Kahlen!" cried Durland. Then, sinking back in his chair, "Of course," he murmured.

"What do you mean?" Monsieur Frandupont was erect in his seat, like an old hound on the scent.

"Why, Kahlen," said Durland slowly, "has been a mystery ever since he came here. They phoned in from headquarters saying he was coming, and asking us to attach him temporarily. I've been trying to find out who he is, and why, ever since. Can't get any satisfaction. Can't even find out his previous unit. Queer, that's all."

"Wormed his way in, I suppose, through some influence," said Pennock. "But, lord, surely H.Q. hasn't got anything to do with it!"

Frandupont shook his head.

"You cannot tell," he said. "The trail of the spy runs in strange places. They are very powerful. They have amazing ramifications."

"What's the next move?" questioned Durland.

"Thus!" cried Frandupont, and his eyes were alight. "Your spy, this Kahlen, must have a principal here in the village. That is the man we must

get. I have my own ideas, you will understand, but I can say nothing now. You must keep close to me. We must work together. Have you a man who can come and report here without exciting attention?"

Durland frowned.

"You mean bring messages? No, darned if I can think of any man who might naturally come to the château."

"I recall!" cried the old Frenchman. "There is one who comes here to pay court. One of your mechanics who comes to see one of my maids. A good fellow. A bright one. I have noticed. Can you not use him?"

Durland and Pennock exchanged glances of mutual ignorance.

"Bland!" cried the old man. "That is the man. One Bland. He is a private, hey?"

Durland remembered. Bland. Of course. A mechanic in Number Three Flight.

"Good," he said. "We can arrange for him to come when he's off duty, or even to break bounds if it's necessary."

"That is right," approved the old man. "Have him come to me with whatever news you have. And I shall keep faith with you. There must be no quarter for spies, *mes enfants!*"

Pennock was trying to recall something having to

do with Bland. Something that the sound of that name subtly suggested to his mind. Bland. . . .

Unconsciously he was eyeing Monsieur Frandupont very closely. Narrowly. As he did so a peculiar excitement stirred in him, a singular sense of being on the verge of a discovery. A discovery of incalculable importance. He found himself speaking without having consciously considered his words. He was speaking on a hunch, and watching old Frandupont as he spoke.

"Before we go back to the 'drome," he said, "we'll have to see old Madame Pannel. We ought to clear up the matter of that son in the Escadrille."

As he spoke, he felt again that sense of imminent discovery, of being hot upon a trail. And the trail, he sensed, was a dangerous one. All this, it seemed, was conveyed to him through the keen, intent eyes of Monsieur Frandupont.

"But no!" cried the old man. "That would be to arouse her suspicion! You must leave it to me, my friends. I will attend to that old lady. She must not suspect!"

He accompanied them to the porch of the château and waited there with them while the squadron car drove up from the service court. As the lights of the big car swung around the corner of the house, Pennock abruptly grasped Durland's arm.

"What's that?" he cried, for the headlights had shown briefly the black silhouette of a man who crossed the drive in front of the car.

"One of our men," said Durland, puzzled.

Monsieur Frandupont chuckled.

"It is the good Bland," he remarked. "He has been calling on Hortense."

Pennock became strangely silent as they drove away, and he didn't speak until the car had left the château's park.

"What we've got to do," he said then, "is to have a little talk with that old lady at the inn."

"But old Frandupont—"

"Leave it to me, Ken," said Pennock. "She'll never open up to him as she will to a flying man."

In spite of Durland's protests Pennock carried his point, and they drove to the inn, where they found the old lady alone by the sitting-room fire. From above came the loud sounds of Bill Higgins' flight supper, and the riotous rhythm of their singing sounded strangely in the old world atmosphere of the little sitting room where the old lady sat with her knitting. She greeted them with the quaint, sweet courtesy that she always had for the officers of Seventy-Seven. She remarked that although she was slightly deaf, the music of the gentlemen upstairs came to her ears ever so faintly, and she said with a

fragile smile that it sounded sweet to her, because of the memories it brought her.

"Of course," Durland said, encouraging her. "It would remind you of your son." And he felt ridiculously ashamed of himself as he thus deliberately pumped her.

She nodded quite innocently, and smiled.

"He was, I suppose," said Durland—and he wondered that Pennock left it all to him—"he was American?"

"Of course." Her voice came in a murmur, and tears were in her eyes. Pennock was watching; watching her very closely.

"His father," she murmured, "is Monsieur Mason. He is rich. A rich American."

"Bud Mason!" cried Durland. "Bud Mason, of the Escadrille! I knew him!"

"You knew him?" she cried out in mingled surprise and delight.

"Of course! But—you say he is your son?"

"Ah, no! But I call him that. He was son to me. You see I nursed him from when he was a little boy. When his father owned the château—"

"But Monsieur Frandupont?"

She shrugged her shoulders in an extremely delicate gesture of dislike.

"He bought it from Monsieur Mason just before

this so terrible war. He is not one of the—well, who can say?" Again she shrugged. Far too sweet of nature to condemn another, she dismissed Monsieur Frandupont with a charitable shrug.

"Come," murmured Pennock thoughtfully. "We must be getting back."

But he remained silent until the car rolled into the concrete parkway of the aërodrome.

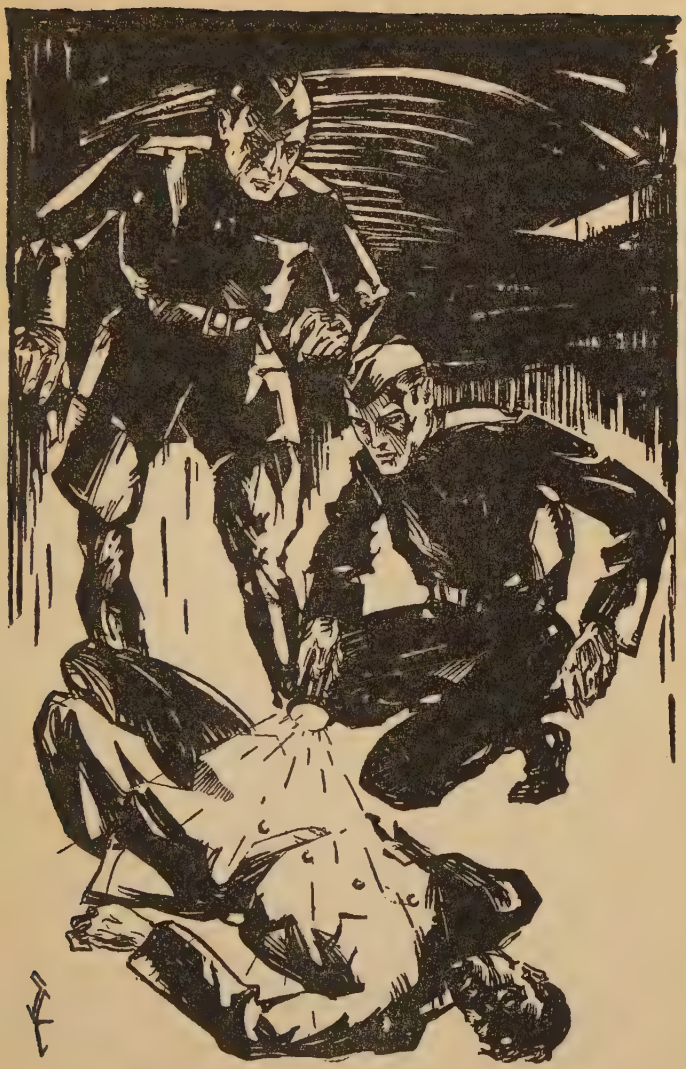
"I don't know what's on your mind," complained Durland, as they got out, "but I'm in something of a daze. Don't see how the evening's got us anywhere at all."

"Let's have a look at Bill's ship," said Pennock.

Durland followed him to Number Three hangar with a disgruntled frown on his face. Pennock was acting very oddly, he thought. Seemed to have dried up like a dehydrated clam.

"Got a flash?" demanded Pennock.

Durland took out his flashlight, and they both picked their way around the planes that occupied the hangar. Pennock knew exactly where to find the machine that had been tampered with, and he led the way to it with brusque assurance. But they both stopped short before they reached it. Stopped short and stood gazing down upon the thing that the flashlight showed them—the body of Corporal Kahlen,



Durland was on his knees beside the body. "He's dead," he said very quietly.

who lay under one wing of the plane with the bone handle of a knife protruding from his throat.

Durland caught his breath with a click that had the sharp sound of an exclamation, and Pennock stood frozen in thought. The warning! He had felt it. He had known there was danger. There had been something inside of him that had sensed this very discovery.

Durland was on his knees beside the body.

"He's dead," he said very quietly. And there was a long silence between them.

CHAPTER XVIII

Pennock Plays a Hunch

IT might be some one who surprised him at—at his —work," said Durland at last. "Better call out the guard, Penny, and put the D.C.I. on the job."

He stopped short with a sharp exclamation of surprise, for, looking up at Pennock, he found that his companion was transfigured.

Pennock had become astonishingly alive. His whole body seemed possessed by a spirit that amazingly vitalized it. His eyes glowed with a strange, excited fire, and his lips were drawn in an exultant smile. The discovery that had lingered in the recesses of his mind, as a word balances on the tip of the tongue, had become suddenly real and clear. He had got it. He had seen things whole.

"No!" he cried, with an uplifting ring of triumph. "We haven't got a second to waste, Ken. Get your automatic and join me at the car. Quick!" And he was off through the crowded planes, leaving Durland to follow.

When Durland arrived at the garages with his holster in one hand and a box of ammunition in the

other, he found Pennock already in the car, and a skilled driver at the wheel with the motor humming. The car shot away even as he mounted the running board, and he found himself beside a silent Pennock who was running a Sam Browne through the strap of a holster.

"Where we going?" demanded Durland.

"To the inn," said Pennock. "You drop me there, and go on to the provost marshal. Get the provost and all the men he's got, with cars enough to carry 'em, and join me at the inn."

"Why the inn?"

"I've got to see that old lady!" said Pennock, surprisingly, and he was out on the running board, to jump from the car as it slowed down in front of the inn.

"Be quick!" he shouted, and the car leaped forward again.

The old lady was still by the fire, peacefully knitting. She looked up without apparent surprise as Pennock strode hurriedly into the room. With a single swift movement he placed a chair beside her and was speaking closely into her ear.

"Quick!" he said. "You must tell me! You know the château?"

"But of course. Most of my life I have lived there."

She was gazing at him very calmly, hardly puzzled by his dramatic intensity of voice and hearing.

"Then tell me this," he urged. "Is there a secret passageway? A way out, through which one may escape if the château is surrounded?"

A flicker of excitement appeared then in the old gray eyes. Did she understand? Did she suspect what he was after? Pennock couldn't tell.

"It is for France!" he cried. "For Bud Mason! For his sake you must tell me!"

"Yes," she whispered. "There is a way out! It leads into the woods by the forest road!"

"Is there any beside you who can show us?"

"Pierre," she said. "Pierre Thenault. He was with me there. With Monsieur Mason."

"Good!" he cried.

Hastily thanking her he was off to search the kitchen for the pastry cook, Pierre Thenault. Hurriedly he told him what he desired, and the man had scarcely time to remove his cap and apron before Durland, with the provost, was at the door.

Pennock dragged them aside, speaking with a low-voiced intensity that drove every word home unforgettably.

"It's Frandupont we want," he said, and turned to the provost. "Take your men to the château, Major.

Surround it quite openly. Crash your way in. Arrest all the servants. Every one you find there."

"And Frandupont?"

"You will not find him." Pennock turned in a fury of eagerness to the car. "Nor will we, if we don't hurry. He will be escaping, by a secret way out. Come, Pierre, you come with us!"

In a few minutes the provost marshal and his men were sweeping through the night without lights, picking a way through forest-darkened roads to a destination that only Pierre could tell them.

At a place where the forest road skirted a swift stream, Pierre stopped the car.

"We must ford it," he whispered.

Leading them up a little footpath through the woods, he plunged without hesitation into the swift water. They followed him, stumbling upon the slippery rocks that paved the bottom, balancing themselves against the tug of the rapids that roared about their feet. On the opposite side, Pierre plunged into the black forest.

They had all they could do to follow him, but the journey was not long. Hardly twenty paces from the river brink, Pierre pulled Pennock back and, peering into the gloom, they saw a little clearing, bramble covered, with a wall of black growth opposite.

"It is here they will come out," whispered Pierre, his eyes glistening.

He had scarcely spoken before the wall of black foliage moved and two dark figures were groping through the brambles of the clearing.

CHAPTER XIX

Death of a Murderer

"OLD Frandupont will fight," whispered Pennock to Durland as the quarry approached them. "Grab for his arms. He'll try to kill us and himself, too."

The two fugitives were close, now, tearing their way through the thorny growth about their ankles. Pennock waited until the taller of the two was within arm's reach of him.

"Take 'em!" he cried suddenly, and flung himself upon Frandupont, the tall one.

The fierce old spy gave forth a cry that was weirdly stirring in the silent forest. A wild, despairing cry it was, with something of savage fury in it—the cry of a powerful beast at bay. But the provost's men had the manacles about his wrists before he could offer fight.

Frandupont's companion turned out to be a man of magnificent strength. In one hand he was carrying a valise of black leather, and this he was guarding with his very life.

Durland, Pierre, and one of the provost's men leaped upon him as one man, but he flung them off like so many dolls.

Using the valise as a bludgeon he sent one after another reeling away from him, and no one dared fire lest a man of their own be hit. Then, abruptly, he disappeared. In one moment they had had him in their clutches; in the next he had passed from sight. Durland flung himself forward into the brambles, but it was Pennock who saw the spy wallowing toward the black wall of the forest, and Pennock fired one shot. Then he plunged forward, his flashlight in hand, to capture the man he had dropped.

The spy lay dead, his hand still clutching the handle of the black valise. But the body was that of a man Pennock had never seen before.

"It isn't Bland!" exclaimed Pennock.

"Who?" demanded Durland.

"Bland," Pennock repeated. "Bland is the man who killed Kahlen. I thought we'd get him."

He stood staring down at the black figure among the brambles. Then, suddenly, he turned and strode to where Frandupont stood, silent among his captors. Pennock walked up to him and flashed his light in the old spy's face. He was shocked at the ruinous marks of despair and grim horror masking the features.

"Where's Bland?" he demanded.

Frandupont stared hard at him with glistening eyes.

"You will never see him again!" he cried, and there was an extraordinary bitterness in his voice. "That fool has undone the work of years! We have died a thousand times to make good our success, and for one moment of anger he sacrifices all. He has paid. That is all I can tell you. You will never see him again!"

Leaving two men to guard the exit of the secret passage, they walked to the ford of the river and crossed to where the car awaited them. At a word from Durland the headlights were switched on, and at a word from Pennock old Frandupont was brought around into the glare of the lights. Pennock, the black valise in his hand, stood with his feet almost in the rushing water, as he confronted him.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"You know," said the old man, mocking him.

"A Frenchman does not spy upon his own people," said Pennock.

"If I am a spy, you have yet to prove it," sneered Frandupont.

"This will help us," said Pennock, and he lifted the black valise into the spotlight's glare.

Old Frandupont stared at it for a while as though fascinated. It contained, he knew, enough evidence

to convict him. Then he gazed at the rushing water as though a vast burden weighed him down. He sighed.

"I am an old man," he said.

But he straightened up, so that his tall, thin body stood nobly erect, and the fine, cruel warrior's face was illumined with the proud despair of a captured eagle.

"My sons," he said, "have died on the field for the Fatherland. Three of them there were. It is little enough that their father should face a firing squad for his country."

"And Bland?" questioned Pennock gently.

"He was a German spy before ever he joined your army," cried the old man. "But a fool. You will not see him again."

"Let's go," said Pennock.

They led the old spy back to the car, and he turned to enter it on the side of the road that edged the river. Before he was beyond the hood of it, however, he had stopped to peer into the rushing water. And then he was out, waist deep in the flood, tugging at something that rolled like a log in the current. Durland ran to his side to give him aid, and together they pulled to shore the sodden body of the man, Bland. There was a bullet hole in his forehead.

"You killed him?" Pennock said to the fierce old man.

"And threw him in the moat. It was our one chance to escape the consequences of his error. But for him we would have put Kahlen away without any one being the wiser."

"But I? I also had seen your man at work," Pennock reminded him.

"Yes," said the old man. "You did not act too quickly."

And Pennock, gazing down upon the dead man, shivered. Bland and Kahlen. . . . He would have been next.

"Let's go," he said again.

The old man—Menderlein was his real name—had been imprisoned to await his trial. Two dead men had been buried; Bland in a traitor's grave; Kahlen, with full military honors. He had been posted to the squadron as an agent of the Department of Criminal Investigation, and had surprised Bland at his treachery.

Durland, who had finished his report, looked up at Pennock.

"Now I want to know how you got on the trail," he demanded. "Was it cigarette stubs or psychological analysis?"

"Neither," confessed Pennock. "It was a hunch."

"How?"

"A hunch. That's all. When I saw that man in the hangar, fooling with Bill's ship, I could only catch the back of his head and one ear, silhouetted against the light. I discovered Kahlen, a moment later, and putting two and two together, I pinned the crime on him. Well, when old Frandupont named Bland as a good man to deliver messages from us to him, I got a queer hunch that something was wrong. And it had something to do with Bland.

"Then Bland showed up with the back of his head silhouetted against the headlights of the car, and I recognized the man in the hangar. At the same time I realized why I got that hunch. It was because I had stood behind Bland the day before, while he fixed my engine and had had that same view of the back of his head. After that it was simple."

"Simple? How?"

"Well, I saw it all, clear as day, at the moment we stood over poor Kahlen's body. I mean all the questions that had been in my mind were answered. Why had Kahlen come into the squadron so secretly? Because he was a D.C.I. agent, of course. Why had he been in the hangar? Because he had followed Bland in to watch him. And so on.

"Bland had been pretending to step out with Hor-

tense as a blind to cover his visits to the château. Frandupont had taken the château a year before the war and done the big thing as a blind for his spying. The old lady put me wise to that. And Bland had killed Kahlen when the poor fellow took him back into the hangar and faced him with his crime—and so on.

"It all came to me as clearly as if it had been written out on paper. I knew just who did it and why. All we had to do was cover that secret passage, chase the quarry into it, and pick 'em up. Always play your hunches, Ken, my boy."

CHAPTER XX

Red Blazes

THE scarlet triplane, with its spreading blaze of radiating yellow stripes, appeared on the Flanders front at a time when the Seventy-Seventh Squadron, A.E.F., had been drawn by the fortunes of war into intimate rivalry with Squadron Forty-Nine of the Royal Flying Corps.

Some pilots of the American squadron were discussing it about the open fireplace of the farmhouse that was the headquarters of Seventy-Seven. In a decrepit armchair sat Major Douglas Renfrew, commanding Squadron Forty-Nine. He was their guest.

"That sun-blazing banshee took two of our men and a Bristol Fighter yesterday," mourned Higgins, gloomily. "He's got to be stopped."

"Not an original idea, that," Ken Durland said gravely. "We've been sending our best men after him for three weeks, now, and I guess Renfrew's been after him, too. The day Squires and I went after him, he just stunted us out of ammunition and then laughed at us. He was a good sport, anyway."

"We've been after him more times than you have,"

smiled Renfrew regretfully. "Had him to ourselves for a week or so. But he's a pretty wary fellow. Flies high and lets his minions obscure the issue. Then he just dips down to deliver the final thrust. Last week four of our best men met up with his circus. He never let them see him through the fog of followers he had."

"Sure!" Pennock got up and talked with excitement. "It's his technique! That boy's just one of the best flyers and fighters the War's turned out. He's cool as ice and a magnificent shot! We've got that, too. Flint, or Postgate, or Ken—any of them can put up the fight, the flying, and the shooting—and I guess you fellows can, too, Major Renfrew"—Renfrew bowed, smiling—"but this boy uses his mob! He gets you involved with a whole mess of triplanes, and you think you're fighting them. But instead of trying to get you, they're just herding you round and cutting you out like a cowpuncher at a rodeo. And first thing you know he pops down out of nowhere and you're lucky to get away with your life!"

"He herded off three of our men," said Renfrew thoughtfully, "and took all their fuel and ammunition away in a running fight toward Berlin. They'll be in Germany for duration."

"Arthur would have understood that bird," said

Higgins slowly. "And I guess he'd have got him, too."

"Arthur?" inquired Masterson, who was a new arrival in Seventy-Seven.

"Yes. King Arthur," said Higgins. He faced the questioner deliberately and in his voice was mingled pride and sorrow. "He was a member of my flight. Like a blind fool, I blamed him once for doing just such a sporting thing as old Red Blazes did when he let Squires and Ken escape after their pills were gone. Arthur'd have got this sunburst son-of-a-gun without fail, too, for he'd have killed himself to do it. You all know that!"

There was a silence, for every man who had known the dauntless Arthur knew that what Higgins said was true. They knew, too, that the blunt, practical Higgins, who saw in his dreams the mid-air crash that had killed Arthur and saved Higgins had changed greatly.

"You know," continued Higgins, "the more I see of this war the more I can see that Arthur was right. I've been reading up on this stuff in Malory, and I'm darned if we're not up against the same old story. Only it isn't a boyhood dream, like the stories were. It's the grimmest sort of reality, as it must have been to Gareth, Lamorak, Launcelot and the rest of them. Probably you fellows remember how Gareth had to

meet the perilous knights at the ford, and how, after he'd slain them, there was the Black Knight, the Green Knight, and the Red Knight. In every combat he was the victor, but all he got for his trouble was another, harder combat. Finally he came to the 'most perilous knight of them all,' as the old book says—the Red Knight of the Red Lounds who had hung on the trees the bodies and armor of forty knights who had come to take him on. And Gareth fought him from dawn to dusk, and licked him."

"That's the stuff!" cried Masterson. "And the boy with the crooked coat who showed them all up."

"And Sir Lamorak," grinned Renfrew, "who made Dinadan and Palomides stand by while he met all the murderous knights of Morgan le Fay and overthrew them one after the other with a tilt with Dinadan thrown in for good measure."

"Well, aren't we up against the same thing?" demanded Higgins. "Here they've been sending 'em up against us, one after the other, and we've taken them on. And now comes Red Blazes, 'the most perilousest knight of them all.' He's hung up a good many crests, I guess, but there's going to be some strong-armed lad from one squadron or another that's going to 'void him of his saddle,' as the old boys said. I guess it's between Seventy-Seven and Forty-Nine

to provide the knight—but always remember that King Arthur belonged to us."

"To both of us," Renfrew reminded him gently. And Higgins, as blunt and simple, as brave and dauntless as any knight who rode from Camelot in search of perilous adventure, was plunged into sorrowful thought as he remembered how Arthur had died under Renfrew's command.

"But aren't you overlooking the technique of this Red Blazes proposition?" asked Pennock, breaking a brief silence. "I can remember the Round Table stories myself, and it seems to me that those lads had a pretty rigid understanding that combat was to be exclusively individual. I can't remember any story about knights that hung around while a whole darned circus engaged the enemy and then pounced down on him after the mob had him in its clutches. That's how this bird works."

"That's up to us," said Renfrew. "If we can't have an understanding with them, we'll have to plan things so that we dictate the terms of a combat."

"That's good," grinned Bill Higgins. "Send 'em a letter."

"No," grinned Renfrew in return. "Send 'em a couple of squadrons."

Ken Durland leaped to his feet.

"Great!" he cried. "Major, that's great!" Pac-

ing the flagstoned floor, he turned and addressed the group of them.

"We take off on a prearranged time schedule," he cried. "The whole strength of Forty-Nine and Seventy-Seven combined! We've just been equipped with Spads, and we can break in the new machines on Red Blazes! Then—how are we going to find 'em?"

"That's easy," cried Pennock. "Comb the lines. They'll be out, all right. It's just a matter of patrolling until we meet up with 'em!"

"Only we won't!" grinned Higgins. "Something tells me that when Red Blazes sees thirty or forty of us approaching his precious thirty or thirty-five little triplanes, he's going to blow his bugle and have 'em all light out for home. They're not looking for tourneys, they're looking for scalps."

"Bill's right," said Renfrew. "Your Red Blazes is out to engage flights, not squadrons. We won't see anything but their tails if we hunt in force. What we've got to do is to split our forces up. Form one flight of four—the two best men of each squadron. Form six more flights of five apiece—three flights from Forty-Nine and three from Seventy-Seven—that'll give us even chances."

"And hunt separately?" suggested Pennock. "But that'll put us back in the same hole."

"Separately," speculated Renfrew, "but not far di-

vided. We'll go out on a clear day, but we'll look for some fluffy clouds about the sky. The picked flight of four will hit the ceiling. The rest of 'em will fly at various levels, from five to twelve thousand feet. All of 'em will keep within two or three thousand yards of each other, and use every trick of the game to keep out of one another's sight. That way I doubt if Red Blazes' circus will spot more than two flights at once, and maybe he'll spot only one. The one that finds him will fire a signal—five bursts in quick succession."

"That's the stuff!" cried Durland. "And then we all close in."

"Close in and engage the mob!" cried Higgins. "Then the Big Four hop onto Red Blazes!"

"One at a time!" laughed Renfrew. "We flip for which squadron sends in the first man. If he's downed the next man tries. If all four lose out, we'll have every man in the show numbered to follow in succession. If we herd the circus right, and stick to our guns, Red Blazes is ours!"

"Seems to me, though, as if we're giving him all the glory," said Higgins thoughtfully. "Under our plan Red Blazes is the hero of the occasion. He's the lad who takes on all comers, and we're the perilous knights he's got to vanquish."

"We can fix that by having the Flights numbered, and only come in as the numbers of the circus war-

rant," suggested Renfrew. "We'll work like the Germans to cut the individual fighters out, and then the sharpshooters who aren't engaged with Red Blazes can deal with them. That'll make it man to man."

"Fine!" said Durland. "That gives the glory to the best crowd."

"And when does the game take place?" Bill Higgins was alive with enthusiasm.

"Visitors have the choice," said Renfrew. "We'll go hunting the first day that gives us right weather conditions. But we must have our plans carefully worked out so that we'll always be prepared."

"We can make 'em now," suggested Ken Durland.

Sitting around the open fireplace they worked with pencil and paper over the "line-up" for a game in which casualties were to be counted in dead and wounded. As they worked, it became apparent that the appeal of the encounter lay in the test of their skill and courage, in the conquest of an enemy who had slain their comrades and whose existence was a peril to their cause.

The inevitable risk of life gave them no hesitation. They entered into the game with as little concern as, but a few months before, any of them would have entered a game of football. Or as, but a few centuries before, the fabled knights of Camelot would have entered the lists of tournament.

CHAPTER XXI

A Very Perfect Knight

WHEN the day of the "game" occurred, the squadrons were prepared.

It was Captain Paddy M'Canlon, leading a flight of Squadron Forty-Nine, who first spotted the circus. The auspices were perfect. In the blue sky, flecked with vagrant bunches of woolly clouds, none of the other five flights of allied scouts was visible to the enemy. And Paddy, with his cunning and audacity, was the best man in the world first to engage them.

The enemy force was made up of some fifteen D-Seven biplanes and ten triplanes, brilliantly painted in various strange devices. Among them flew the scarlet leader with the yellow sunburst on his wings. M'Canlon found them some ten miles behind the German lines.

Immediately he started to act a part. Approaching in the face of the circus, and somewhat below it, he pretended for just the right space of time that he had not sighted the enemy. With a scant few minutes, then, to show his heels or his colors, he led his flight in an aimless, undecided climbing circle.

Swiftly the flock of enemy air craft bore down upon his wretched handful, and in the last instant left for his decision, Paddy seemed to decide on hopeless flight. With his pilots gleefully ranged behind him, he turned tail to the enemy and made for the lines.

They were after him as a pack of hounds might follow the fox, and quite obviously Paddy had no chance in the world. Five S.E. Fives may offer effective combat against twenty-five enemy scouts if the pilots be tried and expert fighters, but five S.E. Fives cannot escape in flight if the leader has given the enemy a good enough start.

To the elated Fokkers it was only a matter of minutes before the triplanes would have those S.E. Fives in range, and the advantage would then be all with the attacking triplanes.

But the chase was one that tried the Germans' speed. The triplanes and the slower D-Sevens were drawing apart, and each minute brought them nearer the lines. To the Germans it became a race against the escape of the fugitives for safety; to Paddy it was a matter of catching the right and unmistakable instant.

The moment came when the triplanes were so close behind him that they were certain to start firing. Then Paddy gave warning to his pilots, swept upward as though to loop, half rolled, and diving, led them

sweeping beneath the oncoming triplanes. As he and his followers zoomed upward, between the triplanes and lagging D-Seven Fokkers, he fired a burst from his Vickers. Instantly four bursts followed in quick succession, and the five S.E.'s plunged into frantic battle.

For an instant it appeared as though they were surely doomed. The fifteen German planes enfolded them in a weaving chaos of winged vengeance, and from the west ten triplanes, led by the sunburst leader, turned back to join the combat.

But as they approached they skimmed with their highest wings the under hazes of a bank of thick white clouds, and the haze was not free from their wing tips before Openshaw, leading five more S.E. Fives, swept down through the cloud upon them.

Instantly the ten German pilots showed the perfection of their training. In magnificent concert they divided, evaded the enemy's fire, and with an intricate evolution enfolded the five S.E.'s in a counter-attack of deadly effectiveness. Rand, with one arm riddled, and a shattered prop, raced for the earth against faintness; and Openshaw, finding himself suddenly, inexplicably, cut off from his flight by a wall of darting triplanes, saw the German leader behind him as he heard the rattle of the machine gun

that Red Blazes fired. It was the last thing he heard or saw.

Two Germans went down in collision. Blanding and Paddy M'Canlon accounted for two more. But Graham was gone and Hammersley, so that as the triplanes crowded into the fight there were six S.E.'s, outnumbered more than three to one.

Then Bill Flint, with a flight from Seventy-Seven, swept into action between the Germans and their homeland, and a quartet of two Spads and two S.E.'s circled down from the high places of the sky.

Those were the four appointed champions, the backfield—the first-string men. Renfrew and Gunnyng from Forty-Nine, Durland and Higgins from Seventy-Seven.

Circling in their high position they saw the battle spread out beneath them. They saw Flint speed in from the east, and then Pennock's five Spads roar down the sky out of the brilliant sun. Sixteen of the allies and twenty brightly-colored Germans were battling below them, covering a vast space of sky. At various altitudes they engaged in their duels and encounters, and the whole force sank gradually as they fought.

Always above them, shepherding his men, watching like a hawk for the quarry that would be driven out

of the mass for his taking, circled the brilliant body of Red Blazes.

Red Blazes was worried. True to Bill Higgins' prophecy, it was not that leader's plan to have his circus engage an equal number. His business was to rid the air of allied planes, and it was accomplished best by using his numbers as his interference. With this large force of allied planes to engage them, the German herding was not effective—they were too deeply engrossed in individual combat.

Indeed, it almost seemed as though the allied planes were doing some herding of their own. They fought with the fury and intensity of expert flyers, and it was not the Fokkers who dictated the positions of the fight. The S.E.'s and the Spads seemed always to keep within the wide circle of the combat, and they only became exposed when an occasional German plane veered earthward.

Then, suddenly, Red Blazes saw one of his triplanes swing out, so that it was isolated from the battle as it circled wide to avoid a pursuing Spad. And a gray, winged form pounced down from above him, to engage the isolated triplane while its pursuer returned to the fray.

The triplane went down in flames, but its victor was far removed from his comrades. It was the opportunity for single combat that Red Blazes sought.

Instantly he dived—and Renfrew, who had won the toss and was first man up, turned to engage him.

The duel was an intricate one. They circled and twisted, each trying for the advantage, for the position behind and above from which to deal the fatal burst. Red Blazes had it, for a moment, but his bullets were wasted in Renfrew's fuselage. Still, the triplane could climb faster than the S.E., and as the two planes wove their way out of the battlefield, it was Red Blazes who forced the issue.

While the two champions twisted and rolled, looped and turned, in that absorbing duel, the network of tracer bullets, the rattle of the machine guns and the resonant roar of the motors created a fantastic world of unreality in the sky above them. Several machines of both sides had fallen to earth. Gunnyng, with the fabric stripped from one wing, was nursing a crippled plane back to the 'drome.

Durland, lost in the midst of the vortex, sought in vain to fight his way through to the outskirts. Only Higgins circled, high in the air above all the battle, alert for single combat.

And then Renfrew went down. His propeller a shuddering stump before him, and his shattered engine spouting dark streaks of flame from beneath the cowling, he heard the guns of his enemy clattering in

his ear and the bullets whining by, as he shut off his petrol and spun down.

Red Blazes followed him. Certain of his quarry, the German ace dived and circled, dived and circled, as Renfrew spun downward toward the German territory beneath. If the S.E. straightened in time, Red Blazes would give its pilot the *coup de grace* in the air. If it spun down below the thousand-foot level Red Blazes would know it was a German victory and return to seek further game above.

But Higgins interfered. Red Blazes came out of a dive to hear the chatter of a machine gun in his ear. He whipped about, to see the swift wings of a Spad skim under him.

He turned, climbing, and the Spad spat fire up at him from below. With cold disdain for the collision he invited, the German heroically dipped and fired into the face of his enemy. The Spad veered away into a spin, and Red Blazes, circling, looked for other enemies. He was not to be trapped again.

Renfrew held to his spin within five hundred feet of the earth. With no room left to choose his landing, he swept swiftly around a small field and sideslipped into it. There was a tense moment as he kicked his rudder and flipped his ailerons for the landing, a jolting bump, and the feel of earth beneath

his wheels. Then his plane was still, and he vaulted out, with the knowledge that, marooned behind the German lines, the war for him was over.

But the battle was not over, and hardly noticing the loneliness of the field and the opportunity for escape it offered him, he scanned the skies for a sign of how the scrap was going.

The distant clatter in the high ether told that the flights were still engaged with the German circus, but he could only indistinctly see the various planes. It surprised him to find that the battle had drifted some miles to the southward. Red Blazes—where had he got to?

The sound of a motor betrayed the German leader's presence almost directly above him. Red Blazes was flying low—hardly two thousand feet above the earth. As Renfrew saw him, he was turning toward the distant fight—and then the roar of a motor was close in Renfrew's ears, and a Spad swept into the field. The roar was dwindled to a drone, and the visitor alighted.

Renfrew ran toward the machine as it rolled to a stop, but before he reached it Higgins had clambered out and stood, swaying, with one hand on the cowling of his cockpit. He seemed like a spent rider, standing by his stirrup.

"Get in!" he cried, his voice rising harshly above

the rumble of the motor. "Get into this ship and up after him!"

Then Renfrew was standing beside him, studying the chalk-white face of the wounded man.

"It's our chance!" snapped Higgins.

In a split second of protest, Renfrew gave tribute to the sacrifice of a gallant comrade. Higgins was wounded too seriously to fight, but not so seriously that he could not have used his unscathed Spad for an escape. Instead he had landed to give Renfrew his undamaged ship—a fresh mount for the uninjured knight—while he would accept capture.

For that split second Renfrew stood with the appreciation of Higgins' chivalry in his mind and on his lips. And then an influx of gray-clothed men streaming into the field warned him that an instant's hesitation would make Higgins' sacrifice in vain.

"Sportsman!" he cried, with a quick snatch at Bill's hand.

CHAPTER XXII

Renfrew Shoots It Out

RENFREW vaulted into the cockpit and shoved the throttle forward as Higgins plunged, staggering, away from the moving Spad. As he soared over the trees that hedged the field, Renfrew saw the gallant captain stumble, fall, and his figure become obscure by an enclosing mass of gray.

He knew, then, that there could be no more failure. If Higgins was conscious he would watch that fight. And Higgins must see the successful consummation of his sacrifice.

Climbing in a bee line for the distant battle, Renfrew kept his eyes upon the bright patch of color that danced in the air between him and the widespread field of combat. It was Red Blazes, returning to shepherd his flock.

And the flock of Red Blazes had need of him. From the time when Paddy M'Canlon first engaged the D-Sevens, hardly fifteen minutes had passed, but it had been passed by winged demons, by tense, exhilarated pilots whose lives hung upon the accuracy of hair-trigger calculations. There were five tri-

planes left in the lists, now, and a scant half dozen D-Sevens. All the rest had been fought down or had fled. And seventeen planes of Forty-Nine and Seventy-Seven sped about in swift maneuvers to prevent the escape of what enemies remained.

Renfrew, on the trail of Red Blazes, knew that the German leader, with no knowledge of the Spad that followed him, would pounce into the battle with a deadly greeting for the first of the unsuspecting allies he met. So, as he neared the range of a thousand yards from that brilliant, dancing insect figure, he fired a challenging shot. Red Blazes, who could afford to leave no enemy behind him, swept about in a neat turn, and roared back in a long dive toward Renfrew's Spad.

Alertly Renfrew awaited the exact second when Red Blazes should open fire. It wouldn't be long, and when it came it would be fired to kill. If Renfrew turned out, dodged, the slightest moment too soon, Red Blazes would have a chance to follow. Renfrew's best bet was to fly straight into the other's guns and outguess the instant of fire.

True to Renfrew's guess, the German came down in a long line, straight for him. They were approaching each other at two miles a minute—four miles a minute—and the speed of Red Blazes increased as he pounded down.

Then it came. For a second it seemed as though Red Blazes must pass above Renfrew's head—and Renfrew saw it coming. Red Blazes tilted abruptly. If both planes kept their course, they would collide in about five seconds of time.

The enemy fired, and the burst had hardly left his muzzle when Renfrew zoomed.

It was a mad, suicidal zoom, calling upon the Spad for every ounce of lift and power it possessed. It counted blindly that the German would not also zoom. If he did, collision was inevitable. If he didn't, the advantage was Renfrew's.

Daringly Renfrew forced the issue—and won. The Spad responded. Red Blazes dodged downward to one side. Renfrew half rolled, found the bright German plane swinging below his nose, dipped, and fired.

All in an instant. In the blinking of an eye. And Red Blazes went to pieces. Horribly, high in the air, the triplane bounced upward. A wing flashed away from its support. A lurch to one side; and Renfrew saw the pilot stand in his cockpit and magnificently wave farewell. The sun-blazing mass fell like a meteor earthward, scattering fragments as it fell.

With a dark, dispiriting memory of the man who had waved him farewell, Renfrew turned toward the battle of the planes. He was in time to see two groups returning from a vain pursuit of the last

The sun-blazing mass fell like a meteor earthward, scattering fragments as it fell.

escaping members of the circus. Spads and S.E. Fives had separated as they returned, and both groups flew heavily, escorting crippled comrades, planes that had suffered too great a punishment to permit them fullest speed. Renfrew fell in with the S.E.'s of Forty-Nine and accompanied them home.

About the fire in the farmhouse that was headquarters for Seventy-Seven, the flight leaders of the squadrons met that night to go once more over their "line-up." Of the twenty-four planes—twelve from each squadron—that had set forth to the "game," seventeen had returned. They had fought with twenty-five, for the most part in single combat, and fourteen enemy aircraft had been seen to fall.

"We can't confirm any of them definitely," said Durland, "but by the word of your men and mine, Major, the score holds, two to one. Those are men we saw go down, and some of 'em won't ever fly again."

"Not Red Blazes, anyway," remarked Bill Flint grimly. "Guess we'll have to confirm that for Forty-Nine, Renfrew."

"Not unless Higgins was a Forty-Niner," said Renfrew gently. "We worked together on Red Blazes. He could have reached home, Higgins could, but he

gave his ship to me." He stared thoughtfully into the fire for a space.

"You know," he said, "I hope Higgins saw him fall. I believe he would rather have died in combat than surrender himself, and it will make his captivity easier if he knows that Red Blazes will never kill another of his people. If he knows that his sacrifice brought down Red Blazes, the 'most perilous knight of them all,' Bill Higgins will not suffer unhappily."

CHAPTER XXIII

The War That Didn't Play Fair

ONE day, Tim Kearney—or "Bud," as he had become affectionately known to his comrades of Seventy-Seven—almost stumbled over a new kind of flyer. A long, lean and lugubrious gentleman clad in a species of non-combatant uniform, sat on a square black box outside the orderly hut of Seventy-Seven Squadron, and surveyed the flying field dismally.

"What's the trouble?" asked Bud. "Nobody at home?" He indicated the orderly room.

"It's a flop," said the stranger, in the flat voice of disgust. "One of the biggest failures ever thrown on a screen. Money wasted, as far as I'm concerned. Just so much money wasted."

"What's a flop?" asked Bud.

"The war," said the stranger.

Bud Kearney stared at him with eyes that widened to the verge of laughter.

"There isn't any drama in it," complained the stranger. "And photographic conditions are terrible. I'm a news reel camera man, see? They sent me up

to the front. 'Get some good, rousing pictures of the American push,' they told me. Huh! That was a hot one, that was! Good, rousing pictures! Huh! Lemme tell yuh what I got.

"First a swell close up of a fog; nothing but fog, see! Then a lot of noise that didn't register on the film at all. In a little while, though, the fog lifted; and then what did I get? Ask me! Go on, ask me. What did I get? Nothing! That's what."

"Nothing?"

"Sure, nothing. Just a lot of dirt going up in the air like a news reel of a farmer blowing stumps, and a lot of birds who hid in shell holes, and moved on whenever I brought up the camera. And that wasn't all. All the time I was cranking they were shooting at me. That was fine, wasn't it? That was swell conditions for good, artistic camera work, wasn't it? Then there came a noise like a coal delivery in a lumber yard, and a big crump landed about three feet away from me. I slid for a shell hole in a way that would make you snicker, and when I crawled out the camera just wasn't there. Fine conditions, all right!" He sat for a moment, sniffing to himself, regarding life darkly.

"Then there was this over-the-top stuff," he continued. "That looked like the only chance for a real picture of the war. All I had to do was wriggle out

over a field of hay and listen to machine gun bullets flippin' up the ground around me, while I cranked the long line of Uncle Sam's boys advancing in front of a barrage. And did they give me drama? Like heck they did! Just walked along without no more expression than if they was walking to work against a heavy wind; and when they got hit, they fell! Fell! Just as if they was suddenly tired and decided to rest! Just folded up in their tracks and fell over in the hay! No drama! No expression! They'd do it better in Hollywood!"

He was profoundly indignant about it.

"A flop!" he pronounced. "That's what this war is. And then they put me on this flying stuff!"

"Don't see what kick you've got against that," said Bud. "No more mud. No more shell holes. And you certainly ought to register a thrill or two with the ships."

"Yeah?" The long, lank gentleman was sarcastic. "Yeah?" he repeated. "Listen to this. They send me over to a squadron of two-seaters. 'Take up your camera,' they say, 'an' get some official shots of the aviators in action.' 'Sure,' I says. And what do I get?

"All I get is long shots of aëroplanes skimming about in clouds. When you get up close so that they shoot at you, they don't even stay in focus. Just a

lot of shapes whizzing by the lens at a hundred m.p.h. Whizzin' by! Just a streak across the film. And will they stay put for yuh? No! They won't stay put! Just shoot up your ship and flip around while they're doing it. Lot of crazy fools, that's what they are. All I've got is some news reels of formation flying, and a few bombing raids that I nearly got mashed up in filming. No drama, no nothing. Just a flop!"

"What you want is coöperation," suggested Bud. "We ought to go out and get Fritz to stage a scrap with us that would just be posed for the camera."

"Yeah," sighed the camera man. "The laugh. That's all I get, the laugh. You ought to try it yourself, sometime, buddy. Try getting a film out of this war that's anything more than a news reel, and see if you like it!"

Bud turned away to hide a wide grin of amusement, and his eye fell upon a five-ton truck which trundled a cumbersome burden down the alleyway between the hangars.

"There's a film for you," he said. "You could call it 'Bringing Home the Bacon,' or some humorous title like that."

Mr. Cooley, the camera man, turned an apathetic eye down the alleyway and regarded the truckload without enthusiasm.

"Yeah?" he jeered. "Industrial stuff. Airplane Deliveries; From Factory to Flying Field; big thrill. But say, what they got black crosses on that ship for?"

"Because it's a German ship," explained Bud. "That's a Rumpler observation machine that Jim Postgate brought down this side of the lines. It landed without damage and Jim had it taken down and shipped back here so we can fool with it—learn how it handles and what its blind spots are. Good dope, that."

"You mean you birds are going to put that German ship together and fly it?" Mr. Cooley's features were twisted into a grimace which conveyed mild interest.

"Every little lad who gets a chance," grinned Bud. "If you know how a ship handles, you'll know how to attack her, see?"

"Sure. I see." Mr. Cooley stared with solemn thoughtfulness upon the busy scene down the alley-way. Under a great deal of supervision accompanied by many words from many voices a squad of mechanics was carefully unpacking from the truck the huge wings of the Rumpler, while others rigged a tackle to remove the engine. Meanwhile curious pilots gathered thick about the scene and persiflage became rampant.

"Guess I'll have a look," said Mr. Cooley at last.

Captain Ken Durland became aware of a long and lank gentleman of saturnine features who stood close behind him as he watched the German plane unloaded, and breathed down the back of his neck.

"You the C.O. here?" growled the dismal giant.

"That's right," said Durland.

"I'm Cooley," volunteered the other. "Official Motion Picture photographer. Credentials over at the orderly hut."

Durland nodded.

"They told me you'd arrived," he said.

"All right." Mr. Cooley was satisfied without being perceptibly glad about it. "Got a two-seater 'round here?"

"How?"

"Two-seater. Any kind will do. Even a Liberty Four, though I ain't made of asbestos."

"Tough luck," said Durland. "That's just the kind of two-seater we've got. What d'you want it for?"

"To take pictures from. You let me stick my box in the gunner's cockpit. Then run a couple of our guys up in this German ship and I'll take pictures of your best stunt artists attacking him. That gives us a picture of the war with a kick to it, see? It's our chance to show a picture like the war ought to be. If you know what I mean."

"Sounds interesting," said Durland. "Let's talk."

They talked.

"You just gimme a pilot," said Cooley, "that knows how to fly. His job will be to keep the camera turned all the time toward the action. Stick some landing flares in the German crate, and load all your guns with tracers. Then I give your ace flyer the tip on how to keep in the camera, and he attacks the Hun two-seater with a Spad. Great stuff. We can work it all up so the two-seater goes down spinning with the landing flares all lit up. Of course they'll just shoot off all over the place, aiming not to hit."

"And the squadron gets a reprimand for playing hail Columbia with government property."

"Naow! You got it all wrong. The squadron gets a citation, and the whole United States of America sees how a ship with the comet on it brings down this Hun, see?"

Durland thought it over.

"Sounds good to me," he said. "We'll wait and see how the boys make out with flying the machine, first, though."

While Durland and the saturnine Mr. Cooley were talking over motion picture production, Postgate was talking business with the commander of Forty-Nine Squadron, Royal Air Force, whose aërodrome was not far from Seventy-Seven's.

"Hello," he yelled into the phone. "This Forty-Nine Squadron? This Major Renfrew?"

"That's right," answered Renfrew's voice. "Commanding the only squadron in this sector that's brought down as many enemy aircraft as Seventy-Seven has."

"That so?" Postgate's voice became silkily smooth. "Guess my figures are wrong, then. The way I do addition it looks like Seventy-Seven is just one Rumpler two-seater ahead of the game."

"Better come over here and tutor in math," mocked Renfrew.

"Sure," assented Postgate, his voice big with pride. "But I want you fellows to have a chance to check up on it first. Why don't you call up H.Q. and get the dope? Get the true story which I'm too modest to tell you. All about how brave Jim Postgate fought down the invulnerable champion of German aces and made him land his ship, undamaged, on Brigadier General Hopkinson's Post Command. He was mad as hops."

"All right," came the voice of Renfrew. "We won't check up on you. I'll accept your story without trying to find out whether the Hun ran out of gas or had a gun jam. But all I want to say is, hustle. You boys have got to act quick if you're

going to keep any such rotten little lead as that. We're bringing down a couple of two-seaters, you know, just as soon as the clouds go back to heaven. Or perhaps you'd already heard about it?"

"No. You can quote me as saying I'm still waiting for the news." Whereupon Jim hung up, well pleased.

He walked forth from the mess and found an exultant crowd gathered about the reassembled Rumpler, which towered among the Spads like a giant moth among mosquitoes. His face wreathed in smiles, Jim strode proudly forward and joined the happy throng.

"How's it rig?" he asked the flight sergeant.

"Like a daisy, as far as I can see. A mighty nice machine, Captain Postgate. Power. Lots of power, I'd say."

"It's your ship, Jim," urged Durland. "Better hop in and see how she flies."

Jim hopped in and the whole squadron saw him take the big German plane up for what Mr. Cooley called its "try-out." Under the low clouds, which, pressing down to the earth, forbade any plane leaving the vicinity of the aërodrome, Jim flew his captured bird two or three times around the field, stunted her gingerly in a few cumbersome spirals, some zooms and stalling turns, and brought her back again. Then in the days following everybody had to have a

chance, like small boys riding a new pony, until the pilots of Seventy-Seven knew how to handle a Rumpler two-seater as well as they handled a Liberty Four.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Authentic Touch

THE heavy weather continued for the better part of a week. Day after day passed during which no combat flying was possible and the ground-hugging hazes made even the many jaunts about the aërodrome hazardous. When the blue finally showed once more, Seventy-Seven again took up its business and Mr. Cooley's production had to lie in abeyance while the flights went out to war. Despite the sour pessimism with which Mr. Cooley regarded these frustrations, he resigned himself creditably to a tireless work of preparation. He had the German machine carefully painted to show up brilliantly in the half tones of the film. He experimented with his camera for effects of light and shade, distance and perspective; and he almost blew up the gunnery hut in his efforts to gauge the effect of various flares, lights, and munitions.

It was finally arranged that on the second day of good weather, Durland, Postgate and Flint, who were to play the leading parts, should get their licks for the squadron in before breakfast, and that the filming

should take place before noon when and if the actors should return.

A slight falling off in the spirit of the players developed when it was discovered, upon their return from that early patrol, that their efforts to down a few enemies had failed. The squadron had nothing to show for the previous day of action, and here they were committed to acting for the movies while their neighbor and rival of the Royal Air Force would be out trying to run up the score. Postgate, having fought his way through a dozen Fokkers to get back for the movie, proceeded at once to the orderly hut to call up Squadron Forty-Nine. He came out thoughtfully to the hangars, where Cooley was assembling his company.

"Okay, so far," he announced. "Doug Renfrew's bunch hasn't found anything that would come down since they took up flying again. That leaves us in the lead, but you got to remember that while we're playing dolls they're out Hun hunting. Now what do I do?"

"Flint's your pilot," scowled Cooley pessimistically. "And you're the German gunner. You take this paper bag up with you and keep it out of sight."

"What is it, lunch?"

"No, it's lampblack."

"But I'm no dark horse."

"And this isn't any minstrel show, either. What you do with that is imitate smoke."

"Smoke?"

"Yeah, smoke. Capt'n Durland gets on your tail, see, and Kearney and Pennock, likewise. Then you take 'em on. Shoot tracers all around them, see. And they fire back at you, stunting like crazy bats. . . ."

"They fire back?" Jim looked with mild concern upon Flint.

"Sure, it's a fight, see? Durland and Pennock and Kearney are bringing you down."

"But that's going to be sort of dangerous, isn't it?"

"Not if you birds can fire as straight as you crack it up you can."

"Hmm. All right, go on. When do I use the lampblack?"

"When I say so. I'm flying right beside you, see? With my camera rigged up to the Liberty. Flint knows what I want, and all you've got to do is keep acting like you was holding off an enemy attack. When Flint spins down it's because you're hit, and then you stop firing. In that way I'll fix it so it looks as if there's a whole flight of two-seaters our boys are bringing down; but the last time, I want it realistic. So when I shoot off a Very light you bust the bag and let the lampblack go. At the same time you

light the landing flares and Flint will kick into a spin or side slip. That'll look like you're on fire, see? And you go down in flames."

"That's great. And do I act like I didn't like it?"

Mr. Cooley smiled a sour, contemptuous smile.

"You amachoors," he said, "make me tired. There won't nobody see your face with the helmet and goggles and all. If you want to register horror or anything, all you got to do is jump out."

"Okay!" Jim chirped pleasantly. "I'll do it. Only you'll have to wait while I fix up my affairs."

"You got time, buddy," mocked the director. "I'm getting some close-ups of the Spads before you come into it. You boys just bring up the Rumpler as soon as it's ready, and Flint will do his stuff."

"Okay," said Jim again, and ran in a bee line for his quarters.

"That guy's scared," grinned Cooley.

"Who isn't?" demanded Kearney. "Any little mistake on the part of any of us is going to bring these darned tracers much too close. This game is dangerous."

"So's football," grinned Mr. Cooley. "Come on up and have your picture taken."

The three leading actors climbed into their Spads and waited for Squires, who piloted the Liberty Four, to take off. They followed him, climbing, and at an

altitude of several thousand feet, fell into formation for the long shot which was to show the American planes coming up from a distance to attack the three two-seaters which would be shown from a film of German flyers taken some time since at a safe distance.

For the benefit of Mr. Cooley this was repeated three times until the pilots learned just what the camera angle was, and how much room they had to play about in. Then, from the toy aërodrome which appeared on the ground below them they saw the Rumpler climbing up to meet them. The Liberty and the Spads circled, taking their positions, while the Rumpler climbed, until finally the Liberty was flying some twenty yards off the Rumpler's right wing, and Mr. Cooley was sighting his camera. Finally he gave the signal, and from their appointed place the three Spads pounced upon the German.

With consummate artistry Postgate tapped Flint's shoulder and pointed out the approaching enemy with a magnificent gesture which was only lacking in that, since he pointed in the same direction as the camera did, it never showed on the film at all. He then cleared his gun for action, and blazed furiously away over the upper wings of Durland's Spad while Kearney zoomed away to attack him from the flank. And Pennock took a position beneath him.

In a few seconds the air was filled with a most realistic network of tracer smoke, and the two-seater was sliding away in a deadly fall with Jim drooping artistically over his silent gun. Then they straightened out at a lower altitude and did it over again.

This time Pennock gave a correct imitation of a gallant airman falling from flight with a missing engine, to the realism of which Jim contributed by inadvertently putting some tracer bullets through one of Pennock's cylinders. And Flint came into the fight by the simple but unexpected method of executing a half roll which knocked Jim into the bottom of his cockpit and brought the Rumpler's nose about to meet Kearney's blazing guns. Kearney, taken completely by surprise, sprinkled the fuselage with tracer bullets, and Jim, not to be put out of the running, scrambled to his place in time to fire a burst high above Durland's nose and take a neat nick out of the cockpit beside Mr. Cooley's camera. Having done his best Flint then took defeat like a gentleman and went down spinning. Squires, abruptly dipping the Liberty to get that spin in the camera, almost hurled Mr. Cooley into thin air, while Mr. Cooley, realizing in some small degree the hazards involved in this undertaking, turned the crank of his machine without pause and with a more than silent prayer.

After that defeat of the second two-seater, it was necessary to climb somewhat for altitude, and Jim used the few minutes of grace to inspect a gash in his flying suit which had seemingly been made by one of Kearney's bullets.

"Didn't I say it was dangerous?" he demanded of Flint, who couldn't, of course, hear him. "Next time I'm going to aim right at the sun. I'd sure hate to bring Ken Durland down."

So he aimed at the sun directly he saw Kearney bearing down upon him and fired just before he saw Durland's plane which was almost invisible between him and the sun. His bullets neatly trimmed his commander's propeller, and Durland instantly lost interest in the enterprise while he looked for a place to land. Mr. Cooley dramatically addressed his Maker.

"You're ruining the picture!" he cried vainly at the remorseful Postgate. "The wrong side's winning!"

But Bud Kearney was left, and Bud was intoxicated with his place as star of the production. Again and again he pounced upon the slow-flying Rumpler; and he fired burst after burst of expertly calculated fire so that the tracers made smoking pathways past that side of the Rumpler which was furthest from the camera. To the delighted Cooley it appeared as if the bullets streamed through the Rumpler's vitals,

and he prayed that Postgate might not murder his intrepid opponent before the end of the film was reached.

It was at about this point in the proceedings when Major Renfrew of Squadron Forty-Nine was called out of his quarters by the sound of battle in the air above him. He joined the increasing group of his pilots who were staring upward at the spectacle of one Rumpler two-seater which was very obviously holding its own against a single Spad which didn't seem able to hit it.

"That lad's a sticker!" yelled Bannerman. "But he's beastly weak on his gunnery. Third time he's missed."

"What's the Four doing?"

"Taking pictures," said one with binoculars.

"Get up and help 'em!" shouted somebody. "That Spad's doing himself in trying to protect the Four!"

"It's one of Durland's comets, too," cried Bannerman.

"Get out your machines!" cried Renfrew. "That Hun belongs to us! Seven days' leave to the man who brings him down!" And he led a stampede for the hangars.

CHAPTER XXV

Renfrew Interrupts

WHILE three S.E. Fives were climbing to his rescue, Kearney and Flint were giving Mr. Cooley a magnificent exhibition of stunting in attack and defense while Postgate hung all the sky with a smoking network of tracers. When Kearney pounced in a dive, Flint whipped about in vertical spirals. Kearney looped, crazily, and Flint stalled for a half spin. When Flint spun, Kearney rolled, dipped, and retrieved him. Flint made a stalling turn as Kearney fired, and Kearney apparently became the target for guns from fore and aft. He spun out of it, coming up under the two-seater, and Flint flipped over to give Jim a shot at him down the air. They dodged and circled, zigzagging in a dipping, bobbing pathway; and always the tireless Mr. Cooley hung on like a leech. Then from the sun three S.E. Fives came roaring down.

Kearney saw them first, and instantly, superbly, he covered the Rumpler with his wings. With a half roll and a beautifully controlled dip he settled down so close upon the Rumpler that Postgate could have

sworn Kearney's undercarriage touched his cheek.

Baffled and bewildered, the S.E.'s went zooming under the two-seater, and Mr. Cooley blazed away with one barrel after another of his Very pistol. In an instant all hands had realized their dilemma, and as Kearney rolled back to desperately face the job of standing the S.E.'s off, he saw the landing flares blaze from the Rumpler's wings as Flint kicked into a sliding stall. Then the body of Jim Postgate disappeared into the Rumpler's cockpit and a black cloud of smoke belched forth. Jim's body appeared again as the plane whipped into the convulsive movement of a spin and then, to Kearney's horror it lurched from the cockpit to become a wriggling, frantic thing which waved helpless limbs in the air as it fell to the distant earth.

Sick with horror, Kearney, Squires and Cooley waved wildly to Renfrew and his pilots who now numbered five, and at the same time they swept, circling downward, with the falling Rumpler. Bewildered, the scouts of Forty-Nine followed the preposterous formation.

The Spad, the Four and the Rumpler landed successively upon the aërodrome of Forty-Nine. Flint, misjudging the weight of his machine, tipped it up on its nose in landing and leaped out to meet Squires and Kearney who, with the excited Mr. Cooley rushed

from their planes to greet him. The S.E. Fives began landing one after another as the officers of Forty-Nine added their numbers to the crowd, and Flint found himself not only outnumbered but outspoken.

"Postgate!" he cried vainly. "Jim—"

"I saw it, old man, I saw it!" bawled Kearney. "It was a blatant, fool idea! We all saw it!"

"Never ought to have gone in for such a—"

"I say! I say!" it was the bewildered voice of Bannerman. "What's the silly masquerade?"

The crowd parted as Renfrew plunged through.

"Flint! Good Lord! But how did you get into that Rumpler?"

"Where's Jim?"

"Renfrew, you son of a long-necked clam!"

A deathly silence fell, for the voice was the voice of Jim Postgate, and it rang from the vitals of the up-ended Rumpler. And even as they stood, staring awestruck at the big machine, a head appeared in the rear cockpit. It was the head of Jim Postgate, but the face was black as pitch.

"Will you believe me now, you old swindler?" cried the coal-black face.

"What is it, a minstrel show?" cried Renfrew.

"No," said Jim. "It's me, with a pound of lampblack in my eye! I just brought this crate over to show you that when a pilot of Seventy-Seven says

he's brought down a machine, he means he's brought it down. We drop our Germans whole!"

"But Jim! You fell! I saw you fall!" Bud Kearney was inarticulate with bewilderment.

"Fall?" Jim's wide grin was made wider by the blackness of his face. "That wasn't me, that was realism. Cooley wanted realism, so Flint and I fixed up a dummy and made it jump for me!"

"Then what did you want to hide for?" demanded Kearney wrathfully.

"He didn't hide!" bawled Flint hotly. "I heard the fuselage wires bust when I tipped on my nose, and I knew Jim had shot down under my seat. Thought he'd need help to get out and that's what I was bawling for. If any of you idiots—"

"Most of my pants are still there," said Jim softly.

"Where?"

"Under the front seat of this crate. Give me a barrel and I'll join you."

"Come anyway," said Renfrew. "We're not proud. All I want to know is why you fellows over in Seventy-Seven are so discouraged that you have to bring down the same Rumpler half a dozen times. It doesn't sound fair, to me."

"What you have just seen," snarled the inspired Mr. Cooley with all the dignity of triumph, "is the only authentical motion-picture representation of the

foremost American aces in actual combat with three German two-seaters. Against great odds three of our machines attacked the big German fighers, and despite the retirement of two planes because of engine trouble—(I saw them land safely, boys, so don't be worried about 'em)—the remaining ace of American aces fought down the enemy to the conclusion you have seen. Gentlemen, I thank you."

CHAPTER XXVI

Seabrook's Trumpeter

WHEN Seabrook shot down his seventh Fokker, it wasn't necessary for Potter to advertise the fact, because Seabrook brought it down less than half a mile from the aërodrome. Even at that, Potter had to get in some crowing about it. He landed close behind Seabrook, and strolled into the mess in his most superior manner.

"Seabrook's done it again!" he gloated. "We went up and flew right into that Heinie. One of Bracher's circus, too. Seabrook shot away his flying wires so easily it was a shame. That boy's going to show 'em all up, before he's through!"

"And where were you during the shooting?" piped Postgate. "Sitting far enough away to be safe, I'll bet."

"That's all right," murmured Potter generously. "I was there. We're going over in the car to see if the pilot's alive. See you later." And he passed out of the mess hut with that little swagger which defied and answered criticism.

"Me and Seabrook!" sneered Postgate. "Gosh, that bird makes me sick!"

"Who is he, anyway?" asked Lynch, who was new to the squadron. "He acts as if he were Seabrook's guardian or biographer, the way he hangs around and boosts."

"He's a grand-stand playing snob, that's what he is," said Postgate, acrimoniously. "He stunts around for the gallery, but he plays safe. He hasn't got any intention of dying in this war, and he knows that Seabrook's folks are millionaires with a seat in the Senate. So he sticks to Seabrook like a tick. Goes up with him every time he flies, and hangs around in a safe place while he fights. If Seabrook lives through it, Potter sits pretty, hanging around Seabrook back home and reminding him of the days they flew together in France. If Seabrook gets his, Potter sits prettier, filling Seabrook's family with tales of his service at the front with the family hero. That's the way I've got him doped out."

"What I don't get is the way Seabrook stands for him," said Flint.

"Every hero likes to have a yes-man around," grinned Postgate. "Potter's a mighty handy little advertising medium. He does the talking, and all Seabrook's got to do is sit around and be modest.

Potter knows that. You just listen to him remind the gallery what a big man Seabrook is."

"I think you're wrong, Postum," put in Bill Flint gravely. "I don't think Seabrook's that kind."

"Well, then, why doesn't he give Potter the gate?"

"I don't know. He's too darned quiet a fellow, to make a guess. But I'll bet he doesn't like Potter at all, and I'll bet Potter gets a nasty tumble out of him one of these days."

"Let's go, boys. Looks like they got Fritz alive, this time!" Which was Bud Kearney's method of announcing that the squadron car had just appeared around the corner of Number Three shed, carrying in its tonneau Seabrook, Potter, and a good-natured, fair youth who wore the uniform of the German flying service.

Captain Handers, which was the captive's name, met the officers of Seventy-Seven, as they gathered about the staff car in a group, and vied with one another for the privilege of shaking hands with him. This he did with a politeness that bordered on sheer geniality; and he spoke agreeably as he greeted each officer. Then suddenly his face darkened, and he burst forth with an exclamation in German which could have meant almost anything unfit to print.

"What's the matter?" cried Potter, in bewilderment.

"That aëroplane!" cried the German. And he was glaring with great malevolence at a machine which stood at the flying line. It was Seabrook's machine; and because Seabrook had the quaint conceit of decorating his ship with tiny pictures of every German he brought down, an artistic mechanic was now engaged in painting a new "scalp" along the line of its fuselage.

"That!" cried Captain Handers bitterly. "Is that the aëroplane which shot me down?"

Six voices answered him that it was, and Handers, his geniality completely vanished, turned vindictively upon Seabrook.

"Ah!" he cried. "I did not see you coming. I did not know that it was you, the 'Scalphunter,' as our flyers call you! So you have added another scalp to your belt, like the American savage that you are! Only wait! We have many explosive bullets for you. Some day Captain Bracher will not be with us, and when that happens, you will receive no mercy!"

His face became flushed as he spoke, and he was obviously working himself into a tremendous fury.

"Wait a minute!" protested Seabrook; and the officers of Seventy-Seven who looked at him saw that he was neither angry nor excited; he was merely embarrassed.

"Look here," he continued. "I've had notes

dropped by you people—dropped right here on the field—and none of them suggested that you fellows had any complaint—"

"Ah, yes," sneered the German youth. "That was Captain Bracher. He is a great fellow, that Bracher. A great flyer, and a great sportsman. But this war is not a sport, my friend. It is a matter of killing one another, my scalphunter. Bracher, he sees that you let a man go if he is disabled, that you fly into great numbers to get your scalps; and he says that we, too, must be chivalrous. When we outnumber you three, four, eight to one, he calls us back, and engages you in single combat; when your guns jam, he lets you go. That is sport, my friend, but it is not war. It will be a bad thing for you if Bracher is—well, removed. He takes chances, and such fighters do not last forever. Then Gunlach will command, and we will not be so gentle with you. We will have explosive bullets for you, then. And," his face darkened bitterly, "we will shoot you out of the skies, and follow you down until you will hunt no more scalps, my friend."

Seabrook gazed at him a while as though worried; then, suddenly, he smiled.

"I had better be careful not to bring Bracher down," he said.

The German youth opened his mouth and then

closed it, apparently reconsidering what he had to say. When he finally spoke it was with the words of a diplomat.

"It is a pity," he said regretfully, "that I should take advantage of my privilege as a captive to speak so angrily. I am sorry."

Nothing more was said upon the subject until in the evening after supper when, inevitably, Potter dragged it out, dusted it down, and served it for the delectation of a mess that heartily yearned to discuss any other topic.

"That German Seabrook brought down certainly let himself out," he remarked superciliously. "It looks as though old Seaby's got them scared wingless. 'Follow you down,' he said." Potter laughed in a peculiarly irritating manner. "Hah. Any time Seabrook lets that happen, it'll be a warm day for the German air force."

"Oh, shut up!" murmured Flint; and Postgate seemed to take the words as a cue. It was as though Flint's remark had released a sort of safety valve in the seething spirit of honest, unaffected Postgate.

"Say it out loud, Bill," he adjured in a voice which reverberated with righteous anger. "Why in the name of Gottenburg and Potsdam can't Potter let Seabrook do his own bragging. You act like a cootie that's proud of the fact he's eating on a thoroughbred

dog, Potter, and I want to tell you the whole squadron's sick of it! If you can't open your mouth without making a noise like the press agent for a circus, for the love of Mike keep it shut!"

And Potter smiled. He smiled with the self-assured, slightly superior smirk that he always used to answer the criticism of crude, inferior fellows who were incapable of understanding such inspired devotion as he pretended to show toward Seabrook.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Seabrook will be up for a D.S.C. for this last scrap," he remarked by way of answer.

"And you'll be up for another joy ride," sneered Flint. " 'Oh, yes, Seabrook and I always fly together. We're practically inseparable.' " His imitation of Potter's supercilious method of sharing Seabrook's glory wasn't a very accurate one, but it brought hearty laughter from the assembled pilots.

"Inseparable until there's a scrap," added Kearney. "I've never heard that you ever fired a shot within range of any fighting Seabrook's ever done, Potter."

And Potter laughed his irritating laugh.

"You fellows can't understand," he murmured, and strolled out of the mess hut.

CHAPTER XXVII

Potter Springs a Trap

POTTER looked for Seabrook where it was well known he could always be found at that time; in a hangar, working with a group of mechanics over the delicate machine with which he fought—his plane. Seabrook owed no small part of the phenomenal record which he had made in his short time at the front, to his tireless care of plane, and guns and engine. There was no detail of rigging, machinery or adjustment that he could not and did not attend to himself, and every last cog, rod, wire, wheel and lever worked in perfect tune at his command. It was because of this unflagging devotion to every aspect of a fighting pilot's life that he was so little known in the squadron; and Bill Flint's inability to explain why Seabrook tolerated Potter was of a part with it.

Seabrook was oblivious to everything but the job which the war had forced upon him. Having led the rather lonely life of a rich man's son he was slow to form friendships of an intimate nature. The fortunes of war had made Potter his roommate, and he accepted the relationship without particular interest

of any sort. His interest in his job occupied him as the most intricate research occupies the scientist; and to him Potter became very much what a bug might be to a botanist—a queer specimen of something outside his particular field. He did not tolerate Potter, he ignored him.

"Wie Gehts!" said Potter, walking into the light under which Seabrook and his men were working. "That's seven scalps, isn't it?"

Seabrook looked up at him slowly, as a biologist might look up from his microscope to see what made a humming noise about him. Slowly and absent-mindedly, he smiled.

"Yes," he said; and bending over the engine, became immediately oblivious of Potter's existence. Whereupon Potter strolled, unobserved, from the hangar, and inflicted upon a batch of newcomers to the squadron, a report of the "talk he had just had with Seabrook."

"Handers, the German," he confided to them, "took just the wrong tone with old Seabrook. Seabrook says that he's out gunning for Bracher, now, and if he doesn't have him down within the week, I'll give up flying. Bracher's doomed, that's all."

And Lynch carried the news back to the mess, where the stock of Seabrook, Potter & Company suf-

fered a definite drop in the estimation of Seventy-Seven.

Seabrook, as usual, went on about his "work," blissfully unconscious of the manner in which his name was traded about the mess room. Having put his plane to bed, he dropped in at the headquarters hut, where he wrote a terse and unadorned report of his day's accomplishments. He used a portable typewriter for the purpose and edited his brief craftsmanship with great care and a thoughtfully furrowed brow. That job, the least savory of chores, finished, Seabrook ran a sheet of paper into his typewriter and wrote letters until his self-appointed early bedtime.

Long after he had retired, Potter burst into the hut which they shared between them. He had been celebrating the victory of which he had allotted himself so generous a share, and his retirement was boisterous. But Seabrook made no protest. Awakened by Potter's loud and free remarks concerning the crudity of his fellow officers, and their inability to appreciate the splendor of Seabrook and the good breeding of himself, Seabrook merely supported himself on one elbow and studied his roommate with the solemn curiosity of an intelligent man confronted with a rare zoölogical specimen.

"Better calm down," he observed casually, "or

you'll knock over that candle and have to go to bed in the dark."

It was all he said, and Potter failed to heed it. In the course of time he knocked over the candle. In murmurous discontent, he went to bed in the dark. Seabrook relaxed his supporting elbow, snuggled comfortably down in his blankets, and went to sleep. He wasn't scheduled for flight before breakfast, and, with a good sleep before him, was at peace with the world until the moment when he would ascend to hunt further scalps.

That peacefulness, that contentment, that unhurried calm and casualness with which Seabrook faced the fortunes of war and, more especially, the rising tide of his success, irked the pilots of Seventy-Seven. Postgate had given voice to one attitude and Bill Flint to the other, when they had discussed the exasperating relationship between Seabrook and his parasite roommate. And all unknown to the apparently untroubled Seabrook, a veritable hurricane of public opinion was forming against him among the eager enthusiasts who made up the squadron. To them their war in the air was a thing to hotly argue, to exult over or passionately deplore. Not one of them was silent; not one of them preoccupied; they were a nervous, highstrung company of thoroughbreds. And Seabrook's quiet irritated them; combined with

Potter's gloating, it became an insult. At the breakfast table the following morning, their hot protests and eager argumentation voiced their resentment.

"It's all macaroni!" jeered Postgate at the suggestion that Seabrook was one of these strong, silent men. "If he didn't like ballyhoo, he'd kick Potter in the seat of the trouble, and let him bandage his face."

"Give him time," urged Flint.

"Time for what?" demanded Postgate.

"Time to give Postgate a contract," suggested Kearney. "If Seabrook doesn't pay him a salary, Potter ought to sue."

"Don't know the lady," said the agreeable, quiet voice of Seabrook who entered, unfairly, through the kitchen. "Marriette and Mary Jane, but Sue, no. Never been introduced." He took a place at the table and poured himself out coffee. "Who is it I ought to sue? The Kaiser?"

Again Postgate took the bit in his teeth.

"We were just saying," he growled bluntly, "that you ought to pay Potter a salary or fire him. He seems to think you're a tooth paste or breakfast food, or something else that needs advertising in a big way. While you're playing the strong, silent man, your press agent is telling us all how good you are. According to Potter, the whole squadron is a bunch of

pikers compared to the incomparable Seabrook. You and he are the lads who'll show up the combined air forces of all the warring nations. The A.E.F. hasn't ever known anything like your heroism, skill or cleverness. And now you're going to bring down Bracher just to show Gunlach that he can't live up to the boast that Handers made for him. That's according to Potter, and we think you ought to know what good work he's doing for you so that you can pay him off."

"Pay him off?" echoed Seabrook in a bewildered monotone.

For a long moment he sat and stared at his brother officers, uncertain whether they were making game of him or not.

"Potter's a fool," he said at last, and he spoke with the quiet voice of an anthropologist referring to the dolicocephalic characteristic of the Nordic blond. "He's something more of a fool than is strictly natural; but I didn't think he was up to anything as idiotic as that. If what you fellows say is true, you can leave it to me. Potter will certainly be paid off."

With which Seabrook abruptly arose from the table and left the room, leaving an awkward silence behind him.

From the mess hut, Seabrook strolled over to the

hangars, seeking his machine for the morning's war. It wasn't in its accustomed place, so Seabrook made inquiries.

"It's back behind the shed, sir," he was informed. "Lieutenant Potter had the flight sergeant roll it out, sir."

Again Seabrook failed to become excited. He was neither incensed nor hurt at what he had learned of Potter's activities in the mess. He was merely disgusted, and had made up his mind after hearing of it to "pay Potter off," that is, to have nothing more to do with him, and to seek another roommate. At this new evidence of Potter's impudence, Seabrook was puzzled. He walked out behind the shed, wondering mildly whether Potter was quite sane. Then he turned into the sunlight and beheld the infamous Potter sitting in the cockpit of his, Seabrook's, precious plane, posing for a photograph which he had persuaded a mechanic to take for him. For an instant Seabrook stood, and watched the fatuous smirk on Potter's face turn to a sheepish smile as he saw the plane's owner appear. Then Seabrook lost his temper.

"I was just getting a few snaps," murmured Potter unhappily. "I knew you wouldn't mind."

But Seabrook was gazing at him with his mouth drawn in a tight-lipped grin which only an occa-

sional German pilot had glimpsed from time to time beneath his goggles.

"Don't get out," he said icily; and Potter knew that it was an order. He stiffened in his seat in Seabrook's cockpit.

"You like to go up with me," continued Seabrook in the same icy, unanswerable tone. "And I'm just going up. I'll use your ship this morning, and you fly that one. We'll keep together."

"But this ship's got a special motor," complained Potter. "It flies faster."

"I know," said Seabrook, and the grin widened almost imperceptibly. "I'll be right behind you."

"But, Seabrook, old man!" Potter's voice was keyed high, as he began to realize his predicament. "They—they—the Huns keep watch for this plane. I mean—they attack—"

"Exactly," agreed the cold, even voice. "They attack. And the ship you're in will draw their attack. You can be my decoy, this morning, Potter. Run up Lieutenant Potter's engine, Anderson. You can take his picture after he comes down."

And Seabrook left Potter to falter the formula of compression and contact to a vastly amused mechanic, while he got Potter's plane from the shed and tuned up the inferior engine. Most of the squadron saw the two machines take off, and until they

had disappeared from sight believed that Seabrook was at the controls of the "Scalphunter." The truth of the matter didn't come out until Flint got it from Anderson. He carried it immediately to the mess.

"I told you Seabrook had the right stuff in him," he gloated, after telling the tale. "Anderson says Potter was fairly green at the prospect of taking part in a real combat, and I'll bet old Seabrook sees that he doesn't do anything else."

The situation pleased the mess, and its pleasure was expressed noisily, so that when Ken Durland entered the mess hut he knew that his squadron was pleased.

"Why the celebration?" he inquired. And they told him. Ken Durland frowned thoughtfully.

"If what Handers said is the truth," he announced, "poor Potter is in a ghastly hole. They'll get that ship if it's the last thing they do."

"What do you mean?" cried Postgate.

"I just came over to tell you. Major Renfrew of Forty-Nine brought down Captain Bracher yesterday morning and flew home with Bracher's bus. Gunlach's commanding the circus now, and he's sworn to get Seabrook's ship if he has to use all the German air force. If Potter meets him, he's a dead man. Seabrook can never protect him in Potter's old ship. The poor fool's doomed."

CHAPTER XXVIII

Potter Is Paid Off

POTTER had begun to realize his doom even before Durland had brought the news of Bracher's downfall to the mess. With Seabrook flying behind him the wretched fellow did not dare turn back. Vanity forbade it—he had boasted too often of his share in Seabrook's ventures—and he could not bring himself to sacrifice his carefully built-up claim to Seabrook's comradeship. With Seabrook behind him he must fly forward, over the lines, into the territory of the upper air which Bracher's aces guarded. A meeting with them was inevitable; but, knowing nothing of Bracher's defeat, neither Potter nor Seabrook was able to foresee how terrible the meeting would be.

Nine Fokkers pounced down on Potter from the clouds, and Potter, taken completely by surprise, saw the air about him filled with enemy planes. Seabrook they did not see, or they ignored him; but Seabrook was not taken by surprise. He had studied that bank of clouds, speculated on the probability of Bracher's using it, and maneuvered for a place

from which he would be unseen by planes attacking Potter from that position. When the Fokkers appeared, he looked immediately for Bracher's silver plane, confident that it would attack the "Scalp-hunter" in single combat, and he swung about for a shot from the rear which would distract the German ace from his purpose. To his consternation, however, he saw all nine of the swift scouts descend upon the wretched Potter at once.

Seabrook indulged in quick thinking. He was completing a wide circle which, suspecting those clouds, he had begun before the enemy appeared. It would bring him about with the sun behind him and the enemy between him and the wretched Potter. Potter, at the first alarm, had swung wildly about, frantically seeking the protection of Seabrook. In that panic-stricken maneuver he turned tail to the enemy, so that as Seabrook completed his wide circle, it was as though the two Americans herded the nine Fokkers with one in the lead and the other behind them.

Potter flew fast and the Fokkers flew fast behind him. In the rear, Seabrook cursed Potter's panic-stricken flight. If Potter would only turn, he could catch up . . . catch up with the battle. As it was they were all fast outdistancing his slower plane . . and Potter could never get away.

The edge of the fan was closing in. Two of the

Germans were outflanking the fugitive. Soaring about his right wing; preparing to fire. Potter wavered. Potter turned left. An alert German pilot swung in across his turn. Potter, trapped, fired; and the enemy was encircling him. Seabrook saw in that wavering turn of Potter's what might be his last chance to intervene. Taking a long sight at the bunched planes of the enemy, he pulled up the pressure handle of his synchronizing gear and pressed the trigger control. There was no response.

Frantically Seabrook yanked back the lock of his gun. Nothing wrong there. He tugged at the cartridge belt, flying blind. Again all was well. He looked at his pressure handle. It was down. He pulled it up, and down it went again. No pressure. No oil in the reservoir, or a leak. Potter, who had no interest in warfare, had neglected to check up on his gear, and Seabrook had no control of the gun.

A burst of gunfire announced that the Germans had gained their range. With a hasty glance Seabrook saw Potter wobbling away in a half-baked spin while two Fokkers spat death at him. Seabrook saw the two Fokkers dive below the wretched Potter, while two more took their places in death-dealing attack. He knew then that Bracher was gone. The Germans were out to get that plane adorned with its enemy scalps. . . .

Potter was now striving clumsily to gain the lines. For a while he would spin or dive or waver downward like a falling leaf. These maneuvers he would abandon only for frantic darts westward, where safety lay; but the enemy pounced upon him every time he tried to escape, and he was forced to return to his dizzying spirals.

Then Seabrook saw a spurt of black smoke leap from the cockpit of the ship which Potter flew, and he saw the flame which followed. Sickened with horror and pity, Seabrook kept his plane screaming downward, until a split in his fabric, and a dangerous bucking of one wing warned him that he could force the pace no longer. With a deft, sensitive hand, he drew up his nose and revved down his engine until his plane was flying as fast as it possibly could fly without dissolution. And he saw himself falling behind the battle as the four from above swept down upon Potter without noticing him. Thereafter he was a spectator merely—a spectator who could expect short shrift after the show was over.

It seemed as though with the burst of flames from his punctured tank, Potter achieved courage through desperation. Seabrook had hardly realized that Potter was in flames before he saw Potter whisk back in a half roll which completely surprised the German who had fired the inflammable bullet. . . . For an

instant the two planes seemed to touch; but they had not touched, and Potter's gun had poured a stream of lead through the German cockpit. The second German machine veered off as his comrade died, and Potter, with the flames streaming off to one side, went sideslipping down the air, his engine at full blast.

The four enemies from above swooped down upon him as he slid down in that desperate attempt to reach earth before the fire consumed his wings. They harried him as hounds might harry a fleeing stag; but the quarry turned upon them. With spurts of his roaring motor, Potter, who must have felt the flame biting at his arms and face, turned viciously to spit lead upon the enemy; and one who had not dreamed that the wounded quarry would dare to fling its blazing body into his very face, tore off his wings in an effort to escape collision.

Down, down, and down, slid the mortally wounded thing of wings and motor. Potter never once pulled back his throttle; nor did he ever take an even keel. Madly he slid downward, veering only to spit back death at the enemy which poured unceasing bursts of fire at him. Miraculously unhurt by their volleys, he wended his desperate way earthward . . . and suddenly, as it seemed that the flames must surely eat away his wings and turn him into a blazing pro-

jectile, the flames went out . . . all his gasoline was gone.

Realizing his good fortune, Potter dived steeply to blow out the little fire which lingered in his fabric . . . and something snapped. . . .

Three Fokkers continued to pounce upon him with their bursts of fire, but the miracle which protected him from the bullets which streamed through his plane, made Potter wondrously cool, superbly indifferent to the pain which the flames had inflicted, and magnificently clear headed in the matter of bringing this shattered craft to earth. In a long, sliding glide, he brought it down, and Seabrook, watching from above with straining eyes, saw it gently crumple in the mud of No-Man's-Land. And then the horror reached its peak.

As the Scalphunter crumpled the pursuing Germans did not turn away. Down, down, they swept. Down they pounced on the crumpled wreckage, to fire their bursts of inflammable bullets into the shattered plane, and soar upward again to dive once more. Again and again the Fokkers dived, fired and arose to dive again, and each time they aimed at a different spot. For Potter had scurried out of the wreckage and plunged into a shell hole to await the departure of the enemy. Mercilessly they followed him. A Fokker dived, emptying its burst into Pot-

ter's shell hole. He ran for another, and was followed by one which fired as he ran. A third plane made the mud leap about him in his second retreat, while the first shrieked down upon him as he scurried out of it. Its wheels brushed his shoulder as he hurled himself to earth—and another was upon him.

With a face seared by flame and ashen with shock Potter finally hurled himself headforemost into an open trench where French machine gunners already had guns trained on the German planes. But the Germans had sworn to get the Scalphunter, and one more died by the Frenchman's fire, before they fled with fuel and ammunition exhausted.

Seabrook, who had vainly followed the one-sided combat, landed inside the lines soon after Potter had found security. He arrived in the trenches to find Potter sitting on a box of hand grenades, sipping coffee through bandages which a helpful officer was saturating with oil. Potter arose slowly to his feet when Seabrook appeared.

"Where's your plane?" he demanded; and his voice had a harsh, cold note which Seabrook hadn't heard in it before.

"Not far," he answered. And he stood staring at Potter with the heartfelt expression of sympathy and gladness for Potter's safety which had been upon his

lips somehow quenched by the queer light in Potter's eyes.

"Can't I take it up?" demanded Potter.

"Hardly," said Seabrook. "The engine's nearly burned out. The synchronizing gear's no good, and the gun's burned into a jam."

"Hmm!" Potter gazed upon Seabrook with piercing, thoughtful eyes; and Seabrook began to realize that he was face to face with a new man, a finer, fire-tested man; a man remade and highly tempered—an entirely different Potter.

"Mustn't neglect it, like that," murmured the new found Potter. Then, with a queer, harsh note of resolution in his voice again, "Fly back to the field, old boy, will you, and get me out a car?"

"Sure." Seabrook was more confident of his ground now. He studied the bandaged head, and the arm, bandaged to the shoulder. "Trip to hospital, eh?"

"Hospital? No!" Potter used deplorable language as he told what he thought of hospitals, and the language continued to enrich his remarks as he spoke of his recent pursuers. "I want to get a ship!" he cried. "I want to get up after those babies and show them what a man can do when his plane isn't on fire and shot to pieces! I've found out how to fight, to-day! How not to be afraid! Back to the

field! That's where I'm going! And if you'll fly with me a day or two, old Seabrook, you can give me some pointers!"

"And you can tell me how to pot Huns with my ship on fire," said Seabrook in a slow, serious voice. "The first point I've got to give you is, keep your ship and your guns in condition, see?"

"I will," said Potter.

And he did. It is on record that he spoke seldom in the mess hut after that trial by fire, but he worked in the sheds without tiring. All that was said of Seabrook, Potter & Company in the mess hut thereafter was said by the rest of the squadron; and it was said with pride.

CHAPTER XXIX

Bill Flint Expresses a Doubt

"TWENTY minutes more, and he *can't* land. Not on this field, anyway!" said the flight sergeant.

"Call it a day, Bill." Ken Durland was worried himself, but his voice was calm, giving good counsel. "If you saw the kid cross our lines, it's ten to one he's landed somewhere on this side."

"Sure," growled Bill Flint, furtively scanning the sky. "I'm not worried. Only I wouldn't like to see him crack up in the dark. . . ." Reading the skepticism in his commander's face, he grinned guiltily.

"I don't like it, Ken," he blurted. "I'm afraid the kid flew back for a scrap. You know how we've been kidding him about that Boche he's always declaring he'll bring down? Well, before we went up on this last trip I handed him a pretty harsh earful, and I saw right away it hurt. He grinned all right, because he's game, but he took the air with the devil in his eye. We didn't see anything of Fritz on our patrol, so he didn't have a chance to show anything; but I'm scared that he turned back after we came over, and that the chances are," his voice lowered

unhappily, "that he ain't going to land here any more."

"You saw him turn back?" Durland's voice rose sharply.

"No. But I lost him just after we crossed the lines. He was just behind me, and I looked down to get my bearings. . . ."

"Plane coming in, sir!" It was the flight sergeant, his voice vibrant with relief. Like all the officers and men of Seventy-Seven, the flight sergeant was fond of Bud Kearney.

"It's him!" Captain Bill Flint announced with a cry that was a cheer, and the faces of the watchers were wreathed in grins as the little Spad bobbed its way in from the field.

"Where you been, you little pipsqueak?" demanded Flint indignantly. "You go out to lick the German Flying Corps and then you can't even find your way home!"

"I got him, Bill!" was the astonishing rejoinder. "Got my Hun just like I said I would. A two-seater. This side of the lines, too! Gimme credit, colonel, I got my Hun!" He was fairly dancing in his excitement while his two superiors stood, spellbound with surprise.

"Stop dancing about like a toy dickey bird, or I'll spank you!" roared Bill Flint. "Just where was it

you saw this two-seater run out of gas and land?"

But Bud Kearney's eyes snapped confidently.

"I shot down this two-seater over in the Jungle," he announced. "Come on up, an' I'll show you."

"With searchlights, sure," chaffed Flint, indicating with a broad gesture the gathering darkness.

"Just ten minutes' flying!" protested Bud.

But Squadron Commander Durland intervened.

"You can't fly any more to-night, Bud," he laughed. "Better wait till morning."

The young pilot's face fell.

"You can take out a car, if you like," suggested Durland, kindly.

"Can't find it with a car," mourned Bud. "It's right back in the jungle, and I couldn't get ground bearings. But I'd recognize that farm and field from twenty thousand feet. Anyway the two-seater's right there, busted up all over the meadow."

"You'll have to fly out in the morning then."

Resigned to the inevitable wait, Bud became immediately the laughable braggart who endeared himself to his fellow pilots by the affectation of an exaggerated self-assurance with which he covered a dauntless ambition. It was characteristic of him that while he told a variety of wild, improbable tales of the duel to the death with that two-seater, there wasn't a man in the squadron who could wring from

him the true story of the fight. All he would vouchsafe in seriousness was that he had brought the enemy down.

"I just turned back over the jungle to use up the rest of my gas," he explained to Bill Flint, "and there, beating back for Germany, was this two-seater —Rumpler, I guess. We just fought it out, that's all; and I guess I got him. He just dove down and cracked up. I circled a while, and neither the pilot nor observer climbed out, so it's a clean sweep. I didn't have time to fool round so I came home."

"Did they show fight?" probed Bill.

"Some. We just fought it out, that's all."

Bud dragged Flint out before breakfast to seek the evidence of his victory. His triumph would not be complete until the wreck had been seen in person by Bill, the doubter. So they flew forth, side by side, in the warm, golden light of a low, early morning sun. Because of that warmth, and because it was to be in the nature of a holiday jaunt, they wore no flying suits.

The triangle of hilly forest land, known to the squadron as the Jungle, was an area that had been little touched by the war. It was occupied by a few isolated farms that lay far removed from good roads, and the trenches that lined it to the east saw little action. It was a peaceful, forest-filled oasis in that

land of battle and destruction, and as the two flyers romped and stunted over its tree-hedged meadows in their swift, winged Spads, they enjoyed the feeling of holiday freedom from the constant menace of the war.

Abruptly, Bud, who was leading, interrupted his flight to circle and examine the earth. Flint, circling above him, saw only a stream below, which wandered, silvery, through woodlands. With a gay bob upward, Bud turned south, following the stream, and then, abruptly, he started circling again.

Flint, looking downward, was mystified. He saw green patches of farmland, which generations of industry had won from the forest. In a clearing near the brink of the stream a large farmhouse sent from its chimneys a shred of smoke into the clear, still air.

To Bill's surprise, his companion, peering down on this scene, suddenly waved his arm wildly about his head and started gliding down. Vainly Flint scanned the landscape for some sign of a wrecked two-seater. Finally, mystified, he followed Bud downward, convinced that the boy's engine had failed.

Bud touched his wheels on a green field a few hundred yards from the farmhouse. He bounced precariously, but recovered and brought his Spad to a standstill without breaking anything.

Flint glided in beautifully over the trees at the

extreme end of the field, sideslipped until one wing almost touched the earth, flattened out, skimmed lightly across the field until his wheels and tail skid daintily touched the ground, and came up easily at Bud's side. They scrambled out of their planes. A flat green expanse stretched invitingly before them, and from it the ground fell away, so that they commanded a bird's-eye view of the farmhouse, below.

"That was a swell landing, Bud." Flint was chaffing again. "Pity it was such a failure."

"I didn't bust anything!" cried Bud hotly.

"That's what I say. It wasn't because you didn't try. Now where's that two-seater? Did it go right into the ground?"

Bud frowned. A horrible suspicion was haunting him, which made it hard for him to endure his flight leader's banter.

"It's right round here, somewhere," he said confidently. "I saw it crack up." He caught the slight smile of amusement with which Flint, who had made mistakes himself, was regarding him.

"Kid," said the flight commander, "it looks like your eyes deceived you. I'm afraid your little two-seater just got right up after you left the vicinity and flew back to Germany."

His smile was kind enough and he spoke with complete sincerity, but Bud, who under all his banter

was genuinely ambitious to play his part, knew only how his eager assertions might have appeared to the captain. It might have appeared as though he had been bluffing—as though there had never been a two-seater at all. Yet he had fought a desperate fight—it hadn't been easy—and he had seen it crash.

"You're wrong, Bill!" he cried. "I did bring it down. And right here! Right in this field! It crashed. I saw it crash, and no man got out!"

"Don't lose your head, Bud," counseled the smiling Bill. "Everybody can make queer mistakes in twilight."

"You don't believe me!" Bud was all hot indignation. "All right. You don't believe me! But I'm going to show you, Bill! You got the laugh on me this time, but I'll show you. Next time I fight I'm going to do it right in front of your eyes, Skipper. If it's the last thing I do, I'll show you!"

Bill leaped forward and grabbed the little pilot by the slack of his tunic.

"Show sense!" he commanded. "Because I talk loose, does it mean I think you're a liar? Gosh, Bud, I know you *think* you brought that two-seater down, and you ought to know I'm darned sorry you didn't. . . . Hello, here's a witness for you."

CHAPTER XXX

Farmhouse Fare

WITH great deliberation a yellow-headed farmer youth was opening the rail fence and entering the field. He approached them with a wide, infectious grin. Even without the grin Flint and Bud would have smiled, for the young peasant's face was so round and rosy, so snubbed of nose and wide of mouth, as to present a perfect picture of good-humored curiosity. In his toil-stained working clothes he shuffled forwards, his wooden shoes scuffling through the grass. Bill was aware of a bulky strength beneath the peasant's shirt, which spoke of immense physical power.

"Hey!" Flint greeted him. *"Comment allez-vous!* Seen any Boche aëroplanes about?"

Without abating his grin, the youth stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Of course he doesn't talk English," cried Bud. And he spoke to the youth in careful high school French.

Suddenly, in a deep bass voice, the young man

burst into speech. Excitedly he rattled off an avalanche of sound.

"What's he saying?" demanded Flint.

"Darned if I know. I think—I think he wants us to come in and have some chow!"

Flint frowned.

"Don't see how we can keep a whole war waiting just to get breakfast," he said.

"But we may find out something about that two-seater," Bud implored.

Flint surrendered.

They left the large field and followed their guide through a wide woodland path, across a meadow where sheep grazed, to the farmhouse, which was a quaint and cozy gem of old world, rural architecture. Entering through a heavy oaken door, they found themselves in a large stone-flagged room in a far corner of which stood a round table with a white cloth upon it. At the table a middle-aged woman with the brown, toil-lined face of a peasant farmer's wife was spreading rough dishes for the morning meal.

As they entered, the youth hurried forward and walked with the woman through a door that evidently led to a kitchen. They heard him talking with her, and the high strident voice of the woman in reply. The woman seemed resentful.

After a moment, the young peasant came back to

sit at the table with them. He sat, smiling and friendly, silently indicating his desire to make them feel at home.

Soon the woman came in from the kitchen, bearing a large bowl of stewed meat and vegetables. This she set on the table and then, after returning to the kitchen for a pitcher of milk and a platter of bread and cheese, she took her place with them and began silently to serve out the food. The two pilots remarked that a single vacant chair stood between the woman and the farmer's boy. Bill saw the woman look at the vacant chair and wondered indifferently who the absent person was. Probably a farmhand.

Suddenly Bud broke the silence.

"You speak English?" he asked the woman abruptly.

After a quick glance at the blond youth she stared at Bud without comprehension; whereupon Bud turned triumphantly to his flight commander.

"They can't understand English!" he exclaimed. "So we can talk."

But before either could say anything, the door opened and a newcomer entered the room. He was a tall man, and a dark one; dark eyes flashed beneath finely penciled dark brows, and a neatly trimmed dark mustache lined his upper lip. He was clothed in the corduroy hunting suit affected by peasants of

the higher class, and he carried a stout cane upon which he leaned heavily. His face was strangely white. All this Bill and his companion took in at a glance while they waited for the sound of the stranger's voice. When it came it carried with it a surprise.

"Americans!" cried the stranger; and his pleasant cultured voice was without a trace of accent. "This is a happy surprise!"

He advanced toward them eagerly, limping as he did so; Bill, stealing a glance at the woman beside him, observed that her brown, creased face had become a mask. It was rigid, impassive, as though chiseled from brown stone. Vaguely he felt troubled.

"I have been waiting for just such an opportunity," continued the newcomer. "A wound, this stupid leg of mine, has kept me from the field. You must permit me to introduce myself. Pierre!"

He turned to the peasant youth and reeled off a swift line of French that the two Americans were at a loss to follow. The young peasant left the house. And then Bill became conscious that the stranger was eying the woman sternly. Again he felt puzzled, as though some vague danger hung in the air. The feeling disappeared, though, when the woman left the room and the newcomer started talking.

He was, it appeared, Captain René Labouchère,

a French aviator. A badly wounded leg had brought him to recuperate his strength in this peaceful forest. But meanwhile the war was going on, and he was helpless to play his part.

An aviator! Bud Kearney was instantly all enthusiasm. Then he must surely watch the war planes fly back and forth above him! He would know—

"To be sure!" The captain's enthusiasm equaled Bud's. His dark eyes flashed and his voice rang responsively. "Of course! But of course! You are the brave Americans who forced down the Boche who landed here last night!"

Bud was transported.

"You're darned right!" he cried. "At least I am. Captain Flint here is just another wise guy from Missouri. Tell 'im all about it, Skipper!"

Slightly bewildered, the captain looked from one to another of the Americans. Then, reassured—

"Of course!" he cried again. His face fell, and he frowned sympathetically. "But it is too short, the story," he said gravely. "We heard the gunfire, Pierre and I. There was much of it. But we were far down the stream, you know. And although we saw that two-seater come down in the pasture, before we had reached the house—I with my leg—he had again ascended. It is too bad."

"But he couldn't!" roared Bud Kearney. "He

cracked up. Smashed. I saw him. That guy could never ascend after what I did to him."

A shadow passed across the captain's face.

"It is as I have told you," he said shortly. Then with a shrug, he was all enthusiasm again. "But it is fine for you to be keen. We must all be keen. I was keen last night at the sight of that battle. That machine you flew. Tell me—it is a Spad, is it not? We did not have them when I was shot down. Nieuports, we used. I have never seen a Spad upon the ground."

He spoke wistfully, and there was, it seemed to Bud Kearney, only one thing to do.

"Come on out, Buddy, and watch us take the air," he invited.

"Ah, but you are not going to leave?"

Bill Flint nodded shortly.

"Leave is right," he said. "We seem to have forgotten that Seventy-Seven's fighting in a war."

Together the three of them left the house, and they had almost crossed the sheep park when the sight of the flying helmet that Bud had picked up before leaving the house and now carried in his hand, reminded Bill that he had left his own indoors. With a quick apology Bill dashed back to the house. As he entered the heavy oaken door, he was amazed to find the woman waiting there, inside.

Startled by the sudden encounter, he drew back, but like a tigress the woman pounced upon him, grasped his arm, rattled forth an incredible warning in his ear, and almost ran from him to disappear through the kitchen door. It was only as, through the half open door, he saw Captain Labouchère hurrying toward the house, that Flint regained his composure sufficiently to grab his helmet and with an impassive face, meet the captain on the threshold. Beyond, in the sheep park, he saw Bud Kearney waiting with the blond peasant youth, and he marveled at how sinister and menacing a figure that rosy-faced young man had become.

"Beware!" the woman had cried in French. "Beware! It is the Boche!"

CHAPTER XXXI

All Brave Men

HIS mind full of wild, improbable suspicions, Bill Flint tried to communicate with Bud as he walked with Captain Labouchère up the hill toward their planes. His sense of a gathering, sinister force arrayed against them increased as he perceived that, politely, gayly, one or the other of the Frenchmen always stood between him and his comrade. He must find some means of communication with Bud Kearney without arousing in the minds of his sinister hosts a suspicion that he sensed the truth.

As they neared the rail fence that enclosed the field in which their planes stood, he realized to his infinite relief that Bud, too, was trying to communicate with him. Their chance came when the yellow-haired youth stooped to let down a rail of the fence. Captain Labouchère stood beside the youth; and Bud, very naturally, gravitated to Bill's side.

"They're Boche," whispered Bill quickly. "And they're planning mischief!"

Instantly Captain Labouchère snapped out a sharp exclamation in a strange tongue.

"Germans!" cried Bud. The two Americans swung round to find themselves covered by two automatics in the hands of their erstwhile hosts.

"Precisely," smiled Labouchère. "We are Germans. We landed here last night. You will be pleased to learn, Captain Flint, that your friend actually brought down our Rumpler and that in landing we badly crashed."

"Where's the ship?" demanded Bud instantly.

"You will keep your hands in the air, please," replied the German. Then, satisfied, "The wreckage is hidden in the barn of this farm. So, also, is the farmer. We had to lock him away, and promise the good wife to kill him if she betrayed us." He shrugged his shoulders. "Necessity! We even borrowed his clothes." He sighed regretfully.

Turning to his companion, he spoke with him briefly in German. They then took positions each behind a prisoner, and pressed their pistols closely against their captives' bodies.

"You will proceed to the planes," said Labouchère shortly.

Helpless, with their hands in the air, with the guns of their captors close against their ribs, they walked into the field and approached the two Spads. While Labouchère covered the two Americans from behind,

the yellow-haired youth advanced and examined the machines inside and out with an expert's eye. While he did so he spoke with great satisfaction to his compatriot.

Then, to the inexpressible wrath of the helpless American flyers, he calmly clambered into the cockpit of Bud Kearney's Spad. For a moment he sat there, playing with the controls. Contented, he cried out as though ready for the next move.

"You," Labouchère poked Bud Kearney in the back with his pistol. "Go forward and swing that propeller."

Both Americans stiffened.

"A false move—!" cried a voice of steel and ice behind them, "a false move and I fire!" An instant's pause and the voice spoke again, calmly. "Go!" And Bud again felt the muzzle of the gun against his back.

He saw that the blond youth in the Spad was covering them from his vantage point as they stood beside the plane. And there was the reminding muzzle of the automatic. But Bud had not entered the war without thought.

"No!" he cried. "No!"

"I count three, and fire," said the icy voice behind him. "One!"

Bill Flint turned a gray, contorted face toward his

friend. There was a vast sickness welling up through Bud Kearney's body.

"Two!"

Bud felt cold sweat streaming down through his eyebrows, and knew that his lips were white—but they were firm.

"No!" he cried. And the cry came out like a sob.

There was a pause which seemed to last interminably. The blond youth in the Spad stared at him with grave, mournful eyes.

"Three!"

The blond youth snapped out a short, commanding guttural.

"Very well," spoke the voice in Bud's ear. "It is best that we are all brave men." There followed some talk between the two Germans in their native language.

"I am going to leave you now," said the voice of Labouchère, and Bud Kearney fancied that there was relief in the forced gayety of it. "I am going to swing a propeller. But do not move, my brave friends, for Captain Loerber is a deadly shot, and he will cover you."

The blond youth was Captain Loerber! As the realization sank in, they saw Labouchère limp around the wing of the Spad. Helplessly they stood, not five paces from Loerber's gun, with the knowledge

that they were covered by an ace of German aces. The efficacy of Loerber's deadly marksmanship had made a real gap in the ranks of every squadron along the front. Bud groaned and Bill Flint, beside him, ground his teeth as they stood, helpless, and heard the Spad's engine roar into life.

And now, as each warned the other with his eyes that a reckless move meant sure and sudden death, they wondered how their two daring enemies would solve the delicate problem of starting the other engine.

With a suave smile the dark "Captain Labouchère" again took his position behind them. They boiled with impotent rage while he herded them helplessly around the tail of the Spad that Loerber occupied, and commanded them to stand within five paces of the second Spad's cockpit. Calmly the blond Captain Loerber began to climb out from his seat.

Helplessly the Americans stood and watched him leave the plane with its engine ticking over and take his place in the cockpit of the second Spad. Helplessly they stared at the muzzle of his automatic while Labouchère started the engine, and they were still staring at that unwavering muzzle as the dark German limped to the far side of the first Spad and put one foot in the stirrup.

At that instant Bill took the final chance. With

an earsplitting whoop which in itself shook Loerber's aim, he turned and dived headfirst under the fuselage of the Spad into which the dark man was climbing. Everything happened at once.

Loerber, confused, fired at where Bill had been. Bud pounced forward and wrested the gun from his hand. Loerber, across the fuselage of the other Spad, saw the body of his companion struggling in the air as Bill flung him over one shoulder. Striking at Bud's face with one hand, Loerber pressed his throttle and his plane moved forward. With one leap Bud turned, vaulted into the cockpit of his own beloved ship, and as Loerber soared into the air, Bud followed down the field.

CHAPTER XXXII

Bud Shows the World

THE struggle between Bill Flint and the dark German flyer was brief. Bill had once been selected as all-American halfback.

"You win," gasped the dark German, as his conqueror deftly trussed him up with the strap of a Sam Browne belt. Bill turned away from him with a grin, and looked anxiously toward the sound of humming motors.

"Your friend," shrugged the dark one, "will not return. Captain Loerber does not lose a fight twice running. Last night he took us by surprise. To-day, Loerber will kill him."

Scornfully Bill snorted a response, but as he saw the two planes swing, roaring, over his head, he realized despairingly that inexperienced Bud could be no match for the deadly German ace.

The two planes were climbing, one leading the way into the upper sky while the other, two hundred feet below, and all of two hundred yards behind, followed. The leading machine Bill recognized as his

own, with Loerber at the controls. It flew the green ribbon of a flight leader.

His heart sank. He saw the German's advantage, and Bud must have seen it too, for at that hopeless distance he fired a burst of shot at his enemy. Loerber zoomed up, half rolled, and came back for what should have been his *coup de grace;* but that maneuver was dependent on an enemy who would fight, and to Bill's horror and his antagonist's complete surprise, Bud, at the first ascending sweep of his enemy's *renversement,* turned tail. He tipped his plane on one wing, aimed his nose at the ground, and streaked down in a falling curve toward the farmhouse.

For an instant it appeared as though he must crash the farmhouse wall, but with amazing skill he straightened for an instant, skimmed over the steep-pitched roof, and banked completely over on his side as he disappeared behind the building.

Loerber, obviously confused, circled once, looking for the enemy that had utterly vanished. Then, evidently, he saw Bud and dived toward him. But instead of zooming upward again, as Loerber must have expected, Bud righted with engine roaring, and, tipping, again swept around one side of the farmhouse with one wing almost on the ground and his wheels almost rolling on the barn wall.

Gleefully Bill Flint divined the youngster's strategy. Bud was hedge-hopping, playing with his enemy by the use of such dangerous tactics as only the most skilled and practiced pilots could execute. A game at which the American flyers excelled; with which Loerber was obviously unable to cope.

Again and again the German ace pounced down upon his quarry only to roar upward again as Bud twisted and darted about trees and hedges, rolling his wheels on green grasses, flipping his wing again and again about the roof and gables of the farmhouse. With its incredible speed, his plane must have been scarcely visible to the foe above. It was an amazing and beautiful exhibition of skilled, tight flying. Obviously the pilot's whole heart and nerve and sinew were given to his mad maneuvers; and while he continued them his enemy was helpless to attack.

Loerber, it seemed, realized this at last. He stopped his mad plunges to circle warily above the darting, dodging form of his enemy. As if to tempt the German, Bud flew straight for a wall of woodland across the stream, flashed about in a vertical bank, and gave his enemy the target of a straight flight with his wheels trailing the surface of the water.

Down dived Loerber, only to miss the quarry as Bud went skimming up one bank and circling the

farmhouse. Up zoomed the German, to fly straight across the hilltop above the farmhouse; and, like a lurking foe, Bud pounced upward at him from the shelter of the woodlands—charged upward across the pathway of his enemy, taking completely by surprise an antagonist who was seeking a fleeing figure. He came up under the German's nose, and Loerber, who apparently was blind to his coming, seemed about to collide with him when Bud fired.

The end was sudden as an electric shock. A roaring German-piloted Spad darting at a height across the field; a winged demon that shot up from the trees; a burst of fire—and Loerber, with amazing abruptness, tipped his plane into a sideslip, straightened out, and piled it up hardly twenty yards from where Bill Flint stood transfixed with astonishment and glee.

Loerber himself seemed to jump from the plane as it touched the earth, and instantly it seemed to burst into flames. In reality Loerber, five hundred feet above the field, had seen those flames start. Now, singed and shocked and defeated, he crawled to his feet beside his captured comrade.

Bud Kearney, wriggling from his cockpit five minutes later, tried to express regret as Bill pumped his hand.

"Sorry to crack up your ship, Bill," he gasped and

gurgled, "but I just had to show you, you know. I said I'd show yer!"

Loerber, white-lipped, was speaking with guttural excitement to his compatriot.

"What's he saying?" asked Bud at last.

"He is saying," explained the dark aviator courteously, "he is saying that aviators and human beings he can fight. But bats that are intoxicated, no."

CHAPTER XXXIII

The Man Who Couldn't Be Killed

IN the sunlight of a crisp autumn morning, Bill Flint sat on a bench in front of the hangars and chatted with his sworn comrade, Bud Kearney. All the rest of the squadron were off to the hunting. Bill and Bud were on emergency call.

"Gather up all the optimism and cheeriness that's still left along the Western Front," he said gloomily, "and you can't make it any different. We can keep at this game just so long, and then we get it. It gets everybody sooner or later, and out of the gang that came over with us, you and me are the only ones left."

"But we're left," Bud pointed out. "There isn't any Hun that's been able to bring us down or even scratch our hides. That's going some."

"Sure; but it can't last forever. I've got a feeling in my bones, Bud, that you and me aren't going to flit around much longer without getting the works. It isn't in reason. Something's due to happen to one or the other of us, and, darn it, I don't know which I'd like to see hit the least."

"My gosh, Bill. You must be hit with the heeby-jeebies. Drag out of the blues."

"How can I? The Huns are crowding the air, like flies 'round a French farmyard. And those D-Seven Fokkers fly circles around us. While we meet 'em fairly evenly matched, we're Okay. But some day we're going to fly into a herd of 'em. Then it's good night."

"But Bill, you're not scared—"

"Who said I was scared?" snapped Bill sharply. Then his voice fell to a low monotone. "But if they get you, Bud. That's what I couldn't stand. It was bad enough at first, when I took you in hand for your family's sake. But we've been at it five months, now, and the darn thing gets worse all the time. . . ."

"Gosh, there's a boy who won't fly again!"

Eagerly Bud seized upon the sight of a strange machine in trouble, to divert Bill's mind from the embarrassing tangent it had taken.

"Boy!" Bill leaped his feet. "His tail's all loose!"

From the other side of the aërodrome a D.H. Nine veered drunkenly toward them.

"He's sliding down on his stabilizers!" yelled Bud; and together the two pilots dashed out into the field.

Superbly the pilot of the stricken DeHaviland, manipulated his damaged controls. Crazily the two-seater slipped, plunged and pancaked, until, with a

crunching sound of protest, it settled in wreckage on the field. As Bill and Bud, with the ambulance and a dozen mechanics dashed to the scene, a tall, grinning youth crawled out of the wreck.

"Hullo," he cried cheerfully. "Meet W. Wallace Breckford, First Loot, attached Twenty-Seventh Squadron, R.A.F.

"You lucky stiff!" growled Flint, as he made himself and Bud Kearney known. "How come you're not a corpse?"

"Just because some people can't be killed, and I'm one of 'em," Breckford walked jauntily beside them to the mess.

"Hear that, Bill?" questioned Bud Kearney. "The gent says there's some people who just can't be killed. Guess that fixes the old blues, doesn't it?"

"Wait 'til the boys come back," said Bill Flint gravely. "And count the men who are missing. We all get it some time."

"Oh, no, Captain Granite," chirped the stranger. "What you say is just absolutely not so, and I'm the boy who can tell you."

"How do you mean tell us?"

"Why, I'm right here to remark that there's some birds who are as safe in a war or a broken ship as the bishop is in his cathedral. There are some babies that just can't be killed."

"Why not?"

Breckford eyed him knowingly.

"Luck," he said. "That's how it is. They're protected by a luck that's all their own."

"Shucks!" Flint flung himself into a comfortable mess chair. "Superstition," he sneered. "That's what that is."

"Superstition," said Mr. Breckford, "is an ugly word. Call it luck, and it doesn't sound so bad. Even then there's lots of people who have it, and are ashamed to admit it, so they pretend it doesn't exist. But it does, and I'm the boy who can prove it. Me and Harry Armitage."

"Who's Harry Armitage?" asked Bud. He, too, sank into a chair, and their impish guest sat facing them.

"Harry Armitage," he said owlishly, "was one of our crowd. We went through ground school together, and we came to Texas together to learn to fly While we learned we gave diligent attention to the war, and we knew exactly what we were going to do. Under Duff Lovejoy, we were going to form the snappiest pursuit squadron on the Western Front. Lovejoy had served with the Lafayette Flying Corps and was then in Texas teaching us acrobatics. We idolized Lovejoy, see? and we were going over in a body under his command. That was the plan, and it worked out

beautifully until Hard Luck Harry started to make his name.

"Luck was something that Hank Armitage just didn't possess. He didn't have as much luck as would give a man a dry landing on the Sahara, and what little he had was hard as a colonel's heart.

"He had a forced landing on his solo flight, and the engine went dead over the only excavated area within seven miles of the field. His second crash was caused by a change of wind while he was landing, and he hit the gunnery huts at forty miles an hour. He went up for an artillery shoot in a ship with rheumatic ailerons and circled it down in front of a freight train that was too surprised to stop. And he hadn't been out of hospital three days before he made a cross country flight and was forced down by the only snowstorm they'd had in that part of Texas for fifteen years. That was the day when Lovejoy officially gave him his title.

"It was shortly after Hank's pinpoint landing test had been ruined by a team of runaway mules that chose to pass the given point at the same instant as he landed on it, that the hard luck of Hard Luck Harry reached out and included me. Me and Clark Patterson.

"Hank had been told off to do some camera work with me, and Pat was taking up another cadet for

the same purpose. Our two ships taxied out onto the field side by side, and, as we turned into the wind for a take-off, Pat lost his engine. I throttled down my engine while the mechanicians ran out to swing Pat's prop for him; but before the men could reach us, Hank had wriggled out of his cockpit and was standing in front of Pat's prop in that cheery, helpful way he always had.

" 'Switch off!' yelled Hank. 'Gas open!'

" 'All right,' grinned Pat. 'Switch off, gas open!'

" 'Contact!' yelled Hank.

" 'Contact!' answered Pat, and Hank swung the prop.

"Right away Hank's luck got to work. The gas lead of Pat's ship was out of order and the engine was flooded. It snapped and popped a couple of times, leading Hank on, and then it burst open with a roar that took him off guard. The prop clipped Hank over the head, snapped the bone of his right arm, and sent him spinning under the wheel of Pat's machine. By the time Hungry Liz, the ambulance, got over to us Hank was looking about as dead as anything in the war could have made him. But the doctor was hopeful.

" 'He's got severe scalp wounds, a slight concussion, arm broken in three places, and he's more surprised than shocked,' he announced. 'I want one of

you fellows to come over to the hospital with him so's you can look after his affairs.'

"'I'll go,' says I, for I was bunking in the same tent with Hank, and was the logical candidate.

"But Pat felt that he was the guilty party, and he wanted to make up for it.

"'I did the damage,' he argued. 'It ought to be me.'

"'Shucks,' says I, 'Hank's my bunkie.'

"'You'd better both go,' says the medic, 'or he'll die while we hear the evidence.'

"So Pat and I hot-footed it for our quarters to lay off the flying kit. We stopped at the headquarters hut to sign out, and hot-footed it back to the dressing station. Several of the fellows had gathered there by the time we arrived, and Lovejoy was among them. He grabbed me by one arm.

"'Listen,' he said. 'You're not going over to hospital with Hank, are you?'

"'Sure am,' says I. 'Pat's going, too. There's twenty-four hours' leave in it.'

"'Don't be so foolish,' he said earnestly.

"'Foolish?' I cried. 'What's foolish about standing by when old Hank's in the gravy?'

"Lovejoy shook his head very seriously.

"'It's his luck,' he said. 'You want to go over with the crowd, don't you? We're all going into pur-

suit work together, aren't we? Well, why take chances? Hank's got a jinx on him, that's all; and a jinx isn't anything to fool with. Not in this game. You go fooling around with Hank and it'll put you out of the running, too.'

" 'But I can't let him down, now!' I explained.

" 'All right,' agreed Lovejoy, moodily. 'But I'm sorry to see you dragged into it. We need all the luck we can get if we're to come through together.'

"I remembered that. I remembered what Lovejoy had said when they laid me out beside Hank on a hospital cot after the ambulance had hit a stray cow and rolled down an embankment. One of my legs and two ribs were fractured, Hank had another arm snapped, and Pat looked as if he'd been fighting a pile driver without his goggles on at the same time as he'd tried to stop a locomotive with his foot, which was badly crushed."

CHAPTER XXXIV

Hard Luck Hank

THE three of us were out of it for the better part of two months," said Lieutenant Breckford severely. "Lovejoy and the rest of the crowd had gone overseas by the time we got back to the field, and the place was lonesome. But it almost looked as though Hank's luck had changed for the better when we passed into the next gang that sailed for overseas.

"The first bad news came when they landed us in England, for we had it straight from the rumor department of the United States War Office that all pursuit pilots were sent to train in France. But when we arrived at Tern Hill and saw the little Camels whisking about above the hangars we felt reassured, and we started planning how we would rejoin Lovejoy's gang in pursuit work in France and wipe Fritz out of the sky. Then Pat got the bad news that we were to fly the brand-new D.H. Fives.

"The D.H. Five was a back-staggered freak of a single seater. It had the beauty of a bullfrog, the reliability of a locoed horse and the gliding angle of

a brick. It was built for trench strafing, to dive steeply and suddenly, and it landed at ninety miles an hour. Its pilots were known as the Suicide Club.

"Pat came into my hut and told me about it.

" 'I knew it couldn't last!' he wailed bitterly.

" 'What couldn't?' I asked.

" 'Our luck,' he explained. 'Lovejoy was right. Hank's packing a jinx that would sink Steve Brodie. And we've jumped right in and taken a part ownership in it.'

" 'I don't see how you figure that out,' I said. 'Hank didn't have anything to do with this.' "

" 'No? Well, where would we be now, if we hadn't gone out for that camera trip with Hank in Texas? We'd be with Lovejoy and the gang, wouldn't we? We'd have been overseas and through our training before this damned D.H. Five was ever invented. Fat chance we've got of joining the old gang now!'

"All of which might have sounded like an idle protest if it hadn't been so completely true. Two days later we had each made a practice flight in the little freaks and the three of us were sent up to do a formation in the only three Fives in the camp. About seven hundred feet above a clutter of those vari-shaped suburban lots that the British call fields, Hank's motor went dud, and he left us for a trip down. I circled, watching him, and saw him skim

across one field, roll his wheels across another, skid through a hedge and crumple up against a stone wall. Then Pat and I swooped down to land near him.

"Well, the D.H. Five has the gliding angle of a brick, and neither Pat nor I had ever landed a brick in a city lot. Irresistibly and uncontrollably we skimmed over the same field as Hank had skimmed across, rolled across the same field over which he had rolled, skidded through the same hedge and cracked up against the identical stone wall. It was all very complete, devastating and conclusive. Hank's luck hadn't been asleep. It had only been napping. And this time it had fixed us for good.

"Hank and I had both fought it out with the butt end of our machine guns, and were minus teeth, eyesight, and personal beauty for some days after the crash. But Pat's case was worse. Pat had taken the weight of his engine on the foot he had injured in Texas, and was counted out of the war for duration.

"He came over to say good-by to us at the training camp where they sent us to learn bombing on D.H. Nines, because we were put down as incompetent to fly combat planes. After Pat had gone Hank and I felt like two Major Generals who had been reduced to truck driving after losing their wives and children in a bombing raid.

"There followed four weeks of misery, while we were kicked around various training camps in France and then they gave us five days' leave in Paris before we joined up with Twenty-Seven Squadron outside Dunkirk. Five days' leave, to celebrate the kind of luck we had! And in Paris, where everybody else could at least pretend to be happy!

"We sneaked into town like a couple of German spies. We were both afraid of running into Lovejoy or any of the old gang and having to admit the depths to which we had flown. And my part of the celebration was considerably curbed by the despondency of Hank. Hank only needed a little sympathy to believe the worst, and I started sympathizing with Hank as soon as we hit town. By midnight the first night, he was convinced that his luck was in the nature of a curse which had doomed him and me and every friend he had to a sudden and untimely death. He talked about it, which made it hard for me; or he reviled it, which made it harder. We covered a show, a supper party and a dance before he'd given up trying to cheer his spirits and then we couldn't find the hotel.

"Eventually I rounded up a four-wheeled hack drawn by the final edition of all cab horses, and I succeeded in persuading the driver to come down and listen to reason. He turned out to be even older

than his horse. He had sunken, gleaming eyes, and a great hooked nose, and it seemed to me that his face expanded and contracted in the dim light of the street lamp. I stood with Hank on one arm and a jazz-mad lamp post on the other, trying to tell him the name of our hotel, and while I tried his eyes seemed to snap and twinkle from under his bushy brows. Finally I gave it up, and reached into my pocket for a bit of the hotel stationery. I dragged it out with two keys, a package of peppermints and a silver dollar. At the sight of the silver dollar the old man's eyes seemed to give off sparks. He grabbed it in a hand like a claw and hefted it close to his face.

" 'Good!' he yells. 'Good! Good! That ladee! She ees lock! Non? Lock! Ladee Lock. Non?'

" 'Not yet!' I snapped, snatching at the coin. 'Not for you. You get that when you deliver the goods. Look! You take us here. *Nein? Non? N'est ce pas?'* And I waved the paper in front of him.

"But he didn't even look at the paper. He stared at me very closely, and held the dollar out of my reach. Then he grinned, and pointed to the wings on my chest.

" 'You keep eet!' he chattered, and let off a stream of French that I couldn't understand. 'Eet ees lock!' he screeched triumphantly. 'Lock!'

"He handed me back the dollar then, and helped

us into the cab. I don't remember whether he ever took any pay for it, but he got us home. In the morning I could only remember his queer old eyes gleaming out from beneath his brows, and the funny look he had given as he thrust the silver dollar back at me. I grabbed my breeches and searched through the pockets. There it was, sure enough, with the calm, placid face of the Greek lady looking off into vacancy, and the pious motto underneath.

"Lady Luck! That's what the old derelict had said. Or at least it had sounded that way. That's how I had remembered it. And then I realized what a blind fool I had been. Shivering with the thought of how easily I might have lost that dollar, I walked over and kicked Hank out of bed."

CHAPTER XXXV

A Lady Points the Way

"WAKE up!' I yelled to Hank," continued Lieutenant Breckford. "'We've got it! We've got the breaks at last. Luck, you loafer. Lady Luck! She's come to stay!'

"At the sacred word Hank leaped to his feet fully awake.

"'Who said that?' he demanded.

"'I did. Listen, Hank. Here's a silver dollar that my kid sister shoved into my hand before I sailed. Like a fool I've carried it around ever since as if it was an ordinary piece of jack. How's that for idiocy? A silver dollar from a kid sister, and us needing all the luck in the world! But last night an old cabby put me wise. He saw it right away, and he had the undiluted charity to put me wise. We got it now, old windjammer. The best and brightest. Pure, unadulterated luck! Strong enough to smash any jinx made this side of hell!'

"But Hank was skeptical.

"'You don't know what you're up against,' he argued. 'You're just talking of ordinary, sentimental

luck. What you're up against is the world's worst jinx, handed down by the constellations and the firmaments. I'm cooked, I am, and you with me. There isn't any dingus that can take that off.'

"But things looked different to me. That old cabby wasn't the ordinary sort. He was a man who knew his onions. You could see it at once, and it commanded a fellow's respect.

" 'We'll give it a chance, anyway,' I said. 'I'm going to have this dollar drilled,' I said. 'And I'm going to keep it with me. After this we'll ask advice before we do anything rash, and I'll bet it comes across.'

" 'Don't kid me,' said Hank. 'You sit here and consult the oracle all you like. I'm going off and get something to eat.'

"He started to get himself dressed, and I did the same. But at the same time I did some thinking, and what I thought was that we couldn't begin too soon to put this lucky girl to work for us. I called Hank's attention to this.

" 'Considering the sort of breaks we've been getting,' I pointed out, 'a fellow can't be too careful. Now what, for instance, are you planning to do with yourself to-day? Are you going to lead the life of a temporary gentleman, or is it to be wine, woman and just a song at twilight?'

" 'Well, put it that way,' said Hank. 'I'm told there's lots of places here where you can get the wine, and nobody ever complained to me that Paris was short of girls.'

" 'All right,' I said. 'Now the point is, that while you paint an alluring picture of pleasure's primrose path, there's a girl back in Mount Airy, Pennsylvania, who says no. For my part I shall see the sights and absorb the Paris of Villon, Hugo, and Baedeker.'

" 'You make me feel sick,' admitted Hank.

" 'But it is an alternative,' I insisted. 'And either way you take it you can run into good luck or bad. That is where this little lady comes in.'

"I took the silver dollar from my pocket and laid it with the face of the goddess uppermost on my palm.

" 'I propose,' said I, 'that we flip the little lady. If she hides under the spread eagle, we venture forth to the flesh pots, and I'll stick by you 'til the likker gives out. But if she turns up smiling then you play round with me. Are you game?'

"Hank was inclined to argue, but also, he was vitally interested in the possibility of a change of luck. So we flipped the coin, and it landed in my palm head up.

"That put the party in my hands, so we started

out after breakfast for a visit to Versailles, the idea being to put the crowded streets of the city out of Hank's wistful sight until his sense of the good, the true and the beautiful had been given an even break. He wasn't very cheerful about it, and complained of his boots being laced too tight and his need for sleep. But I kept him going until we reached the Hall of Mirrors where he collapsed on a plush seat and refused to rise. He sat there cultivating obstinacy while I became rhetorical about the hatred which all the world has for a quitter.

"Then, suddenly, something happened to Hank. He sat up very straight and stared into the atmosphere like a man seeing a ghost.

" 'Do they look pink and make faces at you?' I asked him anxiously.

" 'Do you see what I see?' he cried, jumping out of his chair.

"I looked in the direction in which he jumped, and there was Pat, walking with a limp and wearing an observer's wing on his chest. We bore down upon him.

" 'Don't jostle me,' he warned us. 'I'm the Prince of Wales!'

" 'Why the whereabouts, and whence the wing?' demanded Hank.

" 'Haven't I told you,' he explained. 'I'm the

Prince of Wales, United States edition. All doors are open to me.' He affected boredom. 'I am now looking about for a squadron,' he murmured.

" 'Spill it!' commanded Hank.

" 'When it appeared that little Patrick was canned,' said Pat, 'he diligently applied himself to the written word. I've got an uncle in the War Department, and he turned out to be the biggest thing of his times. He wrote somebody about it, and since then all doors, as I say, have been open to me. I couldn't get a pair of wings, but I could get half a pair, and now all I've got to do is to indicate what outfit I want to be a passenger in. Do you fellows know of any?'

"Did we? If the city of Paris had the remotest suggestion of a speed law, we broke it that morning, getting Pat down to Air Force Headquarters. And it was just as he had said; all doors seemed open to him. We got him headed for Twenty-Seven Squadron so easily that we regretted afterward he hadn't asked for the command. We all departed for Dunkirk together, and on the train Pat became philosophical.

" 'It was certainly the world's most spectacular piece of luck, running into you fellows at Versailles,' he said. 'If you hadn't happened to go out there

at just the particular time—say, how in blazes did you two rounders come to visit Versailles, anyway?'

"And there it was. I told him about the silver dollar."

CHAPTER XXXVI

Death Passes By

EVERY now and then when you read things about the war," quoth Lieutenant Breckford, eying Flint and Bud Kearney with defiant severity, "you see daylight bombing referred to as if it was in the same class with transport, commissariat or Y. M. C. A. work. Don't believe it. That was the mistake we made, and it took us just two flights over the lines, to find out how wrong we were.

"It seemed the stunt was to keep a close formation, ignore the anti-aircraft fire, drop your bombs, and come home. If you'd seen us keeping formation while we ignored anti-aircraft fire, you'd have laughed. But you'd have stopped laughing when you saw us coming home. On both occasions we were accompanied by an industrious covey of German combat planes, and we saw three of our machines go down in as many days. It wouldn't have been so disillusioning if the boys who went down with them hadn't been among the fellows who had welcomed our coming to the outfit. I remember

young Hadlock yet, and I could picture him at the stick of that doomed ship. . . .

"But what I started to say was, that this daylight bombing wasn't any picnic. And what made it even less pleasant for Twenty-Seven was that the combat units around Dunkirk were all busy as a twin-six Packard at a gunman's funeral, and couldn't always meet our ships to give them escort.

"You'd get all nerved up for the trip over. You'd have got off the ground without crashing, although overloaded with bombs, and you'd be all ready to fly through hell to drop them. Then you'd circle vainly over the rendezvous, and the scrappers wouldn't turn up. Obedient to orders you would thereupon turn 'round and go home, praying that you might not crash and waste all the nice trinitrotoluol.

"Hank, with Pat as his observer, and I, with an English kid named DeLancey manning my guns, had this happen to us twice. Then Hank lost his temper.

" 'Orders or no orders,' he declared heatedly. 'Next time I get under weigh for a bombing trip, I'm going through with it whether we get scouts or not!'

" 'Easy does it,' says I. 'You can't flit off alone without getting cooked for fair, and who in blazes is going to follow such a fool play as that?'

" 'You are!' he snapped.

"'Me?' I argued cleverly; and DeLancey and Pat, who were in my hut at the time, also looked surprised.

"'Why not?' urged Hank. 'We've been put down to-morrow for a show together, and we all know how to handle our guns. What do you say if we see it through whether the escort turns up or not?' His eyes snapped fire on the three of us who sat and gaped at him. 'I'm just tired of taxiing bombs around, anyway,' he said. 'I'm all hipped for some action.'

"'It seems to me,' said I slowly, 'as if it's up to Gloria.' Gloria being our pet name for the lady on the dollar.

"They were willing, and they all hedged in around me as I spun the coin. Sure enough it turned heads up, and we stood and looked at each other to assure ourselves that we weren't as scared as we felt.

"We took to the air next morning before the sun was up. Tavistock, who commanded D Flight, was leading us, and we carried a few tons of T.N.T. addressed to a German aërodrome near Ghent. Before we started out, Hank asked Tavistock to wash us out if the escort didn't turn up so that we could return at leisure. Tavistock was a good fellow, and he agreed.

"I can see the picture now of that flying field in

the gray darkness of the morning. A film of mist hung over the hangars, and trailed about over the hill behind them. The dark forms of the three loaded planes looked squat and threatening as they crouched upon the grass. We looked them over carefully, checked up on our guns and ammunition, and settled back in our seats with the peculiar reluctance to speak that afflicts a man when he goes over the top at dawn. I grinned to DeLancey and said something unimportant. He grinned back, but his eyes were darn grave.

"We took off just as a bright silver band of light showed on the horizon. I remember that Hank's engine sputtered as we struggled into the air over the motor sheds, and I was scared he'd crash with his bombs in the take-off. But his engine cleared, and there we were, roaring up into the air above, while the sun seemed to rise in a great swift sweep as we extended the horizon below us.

"A mass of dirty clouds scurried to the rear, brushing our wing tops as we swept beneath it, and then we were over the trenches, and Tavistock was rounding out a wide circle. It was the rendezvous, the point where a flight of S.E.'s should have met us.

"Well, they didn't turn up. That's the story. We circled five or six times looking for them. Then we turned southward over the trenches, and circled

again. We wasted all of ten minutes looking for those darned scouts, and they didn't turn up. Then Tavistock signaled a washout, and turned back toward home. Hank took the lead then, and I edged up to a place off his right wing. I could see Pat grinning at me from his cockpit. We fooled around over the trenches until Tavistock was on his way, and then Hank set his course for Germany.

"It seemed to me then as if I had two minds doing duty at once. One of them was strictly concerned with the spaces about us, intent on the dirty mists which whirled and writhed above and below, obscuring the earth; on the clear open field of milky blue which the early sun pierced with a thousand rays in front of us. The other mind was playing about with the thought of that silver dollar.

"Was there really anything in it? Were we in truth being guided by the guardian angel of good luck, or were we throwing our lives away in a childish flip of the fingers in the face of God? It was dangerous, that's what it was. Ten thousand feet of space below us, miles of empty air before us, and all we had was a few machine guns mounted on inflammable kites that were loaded with T.N.T. And it might come from any direction . . . before we knew it . . . before we saw it coming. . . .

"A flock of anti-aircraft shells came up and added

black smoke to the smoky air. The shock of their explosions sent us dancing about, and Hank zig-zagged, dodging them. With the thought of a fight in mind, we didn't dare lose height, so we climbed out of range, and they followed us.

"We turned west, and for a moment the fire ceased. Then it began again, from another direction, and we were soon flipping about in a gale of detonating shells. The shrapnel was bursting close, now, and I saw it snip at the fabric of my ship.

"Hank circled around and dropped down a little. Immediately the fire started from its former base, and I knew that we'd flown into an anti-aircraft ambush. With all the stuff we carried, and the black filth coughing all around us, I got a fancy wind up. I tried to signal to Pat that we ought to dive out of the mess, and Hank, pulling his ship around with a crazy disregard for the weight it carried, was dipping his nose for that purpose, when the anti-aircraft fire stopped like a faucet turned off. Then DeLancey jabbed me violently in the back, and I turned to the rear and saw them coming . . . five Fokker scouts, plunging at us like five well aimed projectiles.

"Pat started firing first, because Hank had completed a circle, and it brought us up across the enemy's line of flight. I saw his tracers making a

hot pathway to the German formation, and then DeLancey's gun was shattering my eardrum.

"Hank and I were side by side as we dipped to zoom and turn away. But one of our gunners must have killed a Fokker pilot with the first burst, because as four of 'em shot across above us and I pulled up my nose for the turn, a single Fokker came shooting at me sideways, and I all but rammed him in the middle.

"My heart lost three beats, and my stomach made a complete revolution. Also, I lost track of things for a second. . . . Then Hank was above me to the right, a hail of mixed steel was clipping through my wings and fuselage, and DeLancey was blazing away toward Hank. Then I saw Pat shooting down at me, and I knew there was somebody below. I pulled up and over, forgetting the weight of my bus 'til I felt the wing strain, and I was in time to see a Fokker burst into flames under my tail.

"I was up, now, and Hank was down with two of the German killers hanging onto his tail . . . and out of the edge of my eye I saw some other machines coming up from the east. Hank and I set out for home.

"Cooked, I thought, and tried like a fool to whip around and get Hank's adversaries into my gunsight. All I got was a look at Hank's ship and the sight of

smoke pouring out of it. I pulled around to a position that would give DeLancey a chance at the Fokkers, and he took them on magnificently . . . then I saw that Pat was dropping his bombs.

"Why hadn't I thought of that before? I gave DeLancey the signal, and we started dumping our eggs, and while we dumped them I saw that Hank had a gay little fire flickering along the trailing edge of his lower right wing. A phosphorus bullet in his strut. . . .

"Down came the Fokkers again, and this time one flashed by the sights of my guns. I let him have it, and saw his control wires snap, his fuselage splinter. He disappeared under my nose, and the other fellow went up in front of Hank's bus in a lovely half roll to come back and fire at him. I crossed Hank's nose, and he dipped, passing under me. DeLancey took on the Hun, and we got enough shot through our fabric to bring down a flight.

"It stopped suddenly, and I thought of the silver dollar again as the Fokker turned and streaked for the eastern skies. . . . But following it with my eyes, I saw that the reënforcements were gaining on us, and it looked as if we could expect a dozen more of the same sort before we reached the lines.

"Hank was burning. . . . Remembering that, I looked for him. . . . He was almost under me now,

and I saw the flicker of the little flame that was growing larger along his wing . . . and the earth was two miles below!

"Then I saw Pat wriggling out of his cockpit. He slid over the edge until he stood with one foot in the stirrup of the fuselage; then he was edging along, groping with one foot for the stirrup of Hank's cockpit. And the earth two miles underneath.

"It sickened me to watch him, but it fascinated me, too. My eyes were glued to him. To that little rag of a man clinging to his burning kite in that cloud-swept hell of space. Then he was on the wing, crawling among the wires. He was on his belly, reaching out toward the flicker of pale fire with one fur gauntlet. He beat at it, but was not near enough. . . . He edged nearer, further out upon the wing, nearer the burning edge. . . . Then he paused, and I knew why he paused. . . . He had caught sight of the distant earth, and it sickened him. But he made it. I glanced at him again and saw him beating with that great fur glove. Beating and pounding at the pale, white flame. Stifling it. Killing it. . . . He was crawling back to his place again when DeLancey gave me that violent jab in the back and the circus was on once more.

"Only this time it was short, darned short. . . . A burst of gunfire, and a sweep of Fokkers turning

under our noses. . . . That was a close one. The steel had clipped me about the ears, had tugged at my flying coat. Was DeLancey all right? All these things flashed through my mind. A quick glance at DeLancey, a feverish seeking for the flickering, whirling enemy, a hot blast of stinking smoke in my nostrils, and, my God, I was in flames!

"The fire gushed forth into my face in a single flash, and in a single flash, in the thousandth part of a second, I lived for a thousand years.

". . . This was death! Torture. . . . Roasted alive. . . . Or jump. . . . And the earth two miles below! . . . See? All in a gust . . . in a roaring gust of flame.

"Yet I must have slid over the side of my cockpit so suddenly that I might have shot out with the flames; and I saw DeLancey, frozen in his place, staring at me, imploring me with his eyes not to do it. Not to jump.

"But I wasn't going to jump! Not after Pat's fine trick. . . . I didn't think of it, mind you. It came at once. In a gust. In a flash. Pat had done it! Pat had done it! So I could do it, too!

"I hung on to the cowling, and reaching into the cockpit, grabbed the stick. Then I held it over. With the flames hot upon my gauntlet I held it over. And we slid down. It was a chance. A rotten, im-

He edged further out upon the wing, nearing the burning edge.

possible chance. With the earth two miles below.

"Grimly I hung there, and I bawled like a kid when I found that the flames were swept away from my hand and shoulder by the fierce downward sweep of our fall. And DeLancey, the brave kid, with that sheet of fire sweeping off beyond him, was blazing away as we fell at the Huns that harried old Hank.

"I saw Hank in vivid flashes. A black, winged monster that dived and spiraled and spun as no Nine was ever meant to. And then we were alone in a sea of thin gray mist, with our blood-red sheet of flame crackling at one wing, falling like a comet, to death . . . two miles below.

"It was a certain thing. Long before we reached that far, invisible earth, the wings would go, and we'd be two dummies stuffed with blood and bones, tumbling down to the ground. I knew it. . . . But I wasn't afraid of it. We'd done our best, and the end would be a sudden blackness. A quick and merciful thing. We'd done our best. . . .

"And then the ground appeared. . . . A tree. A house . . . and the yellow earth. . . . When we burst into flames we couldn't have been up more than two thousand feet.

"I yelled out something, and yanked the stick over. DeLancey was on the cowling as we straightened out, and we landed like a dream. Crash? Of course

we crashed. But it hardly seemed as though we did. For an instant I found myself standing incredulously on the wing of a crumpled plane that was blazing away like a bonfire. Then I stepped off, and fell into DeLancey's arms. We hugged each other and danced about the field shrieking like fools, with laughter. And a black body swept down over our heads, and a D.H. Nine flattened out to make a neat landing nearby. It was Hank and Pat, and the nightmare hadn't been true. It had all been a bad dream. It had all been a gruesome joke. There we were in the field. Safe, and alive, and together—and, well on our side of the lines. Hank made some remarks before he climbed in to fly home again.

" 'That talisman of yours,' he said, 'is some good luck omen. We consult the oracle, and what happens? We fly into hot and high water, get darned near burned alive, lose a machine, and stand in for at least a court-martial. If it hadn't been for a bunch of Spads turning up we'd all have been cooked to a turn.'

" 'Don't crab,' I protested wanly. 'I know when I'm in luck, and I feel free to tell the world about it. How many planes have you seen land in flames lately with their occupants intact?'

" 'That wasn't luck,' said Hank. 'That was guts.' And he climbed in and flew back to the aërodrome.

"When DeLancey and I turned up later for our court-martial, Hank and Pat met us at the place where our quarters had been before we went away.

" 'Where are they?' " I asked, staring at the hole in the ground.

" 'Right where the mess hall, and the hangars are,' said Hank. 'Fritz came over and dropped ten tons of T.N.T. just after Tavistock landed. Tavistock went up with the hangars, and we'd have gone the same way if we hadn't gone off to win medals.'

" 'Medals!' cried DeLancey, bitterly. 'Medals! Hah!'

" 'He's kidding,' said Pat. 'He just means that we all get citations because we dropped our bombs on a concentration camp that the Independent Air Force has been trying to find for the last ten days. We shot it all to little pieces!' "

CHAPTER XXXVII

The Thing Called Luck

"THAT," said Lieutenant Breckford, still fixing his hearers with the owlish severity of one who knows, "is what I call Luck. And that is why, when I tell you that there are men who can't be killed, I speak as an expert."

"Also," said Flint, morosely, "you speak as a babe in arms. Where's that coin you rely on?"

Breckford took from his pocket a glistening silver dollar and flipped it in the air.

"There she is, and, as I told the boys when Pat spilled the good news to us, she is all the medal I ever want to see. Gloria is the lady's name, and her title is Lady Luck." He handed it to Flint who gazed at the coin curiously.

"Sure it's good?" he inquired.

"Good?" cried Breckford, indignantly. "Is the United States Government good? Is a D-Seven Fokker good? Ask me another!"

But before Flint could even consider his request, the mess hut door slammed open and the orderly

sergeant was clicking his heels at attention before Captain Flint.

"Three enemy bombers are alerted four miles down the line, sir. They are reported to be escorted by six D-Seven Fokkers."

Flint stood with the coin in his hand and gazed into the eyes of Bud Kearney. His eyes were dark with an unspoken query and a fear which was not for himself.

"Of course we'll go!" cried Bud, answering the question.

"Not just the two of you?" blurted Breckford with wild surmise.

"We're all there is," cried Bud.

Flint turned to the sergeant with icy firmness.

"See that our machines are ready, sergeant!" he ordered.

Breckford was waiting at the tarmac when they emerged from their quarters in their flying clothes.

"You're committing suicide," he warned.

"It's luck," hissed Flint between clenched teeth. "I knew the breaks were against us. This morning I felt it. We've been through the war together. We've seen bad breaks and good. But we've lived through it, see? And now, at the end, there's this. A certain thing."

"But you don't have to—"

"Contact!" yelled Flint, and, as the engine burst into thunder, he shouted his words to Breckford.

"If one of us comes back," he yelled. "It will be my luck that it's me!"

The plane moved forward, taxiing for a take-off.

"Hang on to Gloria!" yelled Breckford. "She'll bring you through!" But the planes were gone in a cloud of yellow dust, in a rising thunder of defiance.

Bill Flint aimed at the sun with a singular heaviness in his heart which he had never felt before. Fierce, he had been in the past, with a fiery resolution backed by an amazing quickness of hand and eye. In all the months of fighting he had anticipated each battle, each day of conflict with the confidence of a man as deadly as the most death-dealing terror of the front. He had not doubted for a moment the outcome of every battle that he entered. And only one thing had caused him so much as a wraith of anxiety: that was his fierce determination that no harm should come to Bud Kearney.

He had promised Bud's folks at home that he would look after the younger man, and to Bill Flint that promise was a sacred trust. Only, as the fortunes of war proved Bud to be as able to look after himself as any man in the air, he had relaxed his watchfulness. But Bill's guardianship had been a bond which had drawn the two flyers exceedingly

close together, and made them cherish one another as only a fighting man can cherish his near comrade.

Without Bill knowing it, the war had been wearing him out, beating him down, until what had been anxiety for Bud's welfare had become a haunting fear; a nightmare which visited him in the darkness with vivid images of Bud shooting down the skies with flames about him; of a hideous wreck with Bud's body a battered mass under the shattered wings; of a bullet riddled Bud, gasping his life away in a Spad that veered sickeningly toward the earth. Dreams and visions, they were, but dreams which expressed all the haunting fears which Bill felt rather than visualized in his waking hours. . . . And Bill Flint found that he was afraid to fly. . . . Every ascent he made was prefaced by a battle he waged with an inner voice which warned him to stay on earth. . . . In short, Bill Flint was near the end of his tether, and in no condition to meet the suicidal combat which they now flew forth to encounter.

He knew that. Without being conscious of what the actual trouble with him was, Bill knew that his confidence, his old, fierce joy of battle, was gone. . . . And even in the old days of his deadliest skill he had never been called upon to face such odds as he and Bud were seeking now. It was as though they had been saved for it, he reflected bitterly; as if, after

all these months of fighting with their lives in their hands and death all about them, this had been prepared as their reward. Death in the air, against odds . . . a sure thing . . . without escape or any chance of winning. He and Bud. After all the anguish and peril of the war. Flying together to their death.

Suddenly Flint awoke to the fact that they had long since passed the point at which the enemy planes had been alerted. And no two-seaters, no Fokker D-Sevens were in sight. Nothing was in sight. . . . It came to Bill with a sudden, surprising sense of unreality. As far as the eye could see through the gray-blue sky there was no other plane in the air. And there was a silence. He realized for the first time that his motor roared and hummed without the accustomed undertones of distant explosions and sullen, rumbling batteries.

Mystified and perturbed, he led Bud southward, over the lines . . . and the lines were not shrouded in smoke; all up and down No-Man's-Land no murk of gas was visible. Still, he could not turn back. Unless the enemy planes had passed inward, over their lines. . . . He swung back and soared over the map of France.

An hour later he had given it up. They had seen no fighting planes in all that hour, and soaring above

German anti-aircraft batteries, they had drawn no black fire. Peacefully they flew back to the aërodrome, and as they flew, Bill Flint felt a mighty uplifting of his heart; a feeling of holiday to a man whose work had been to die. . . .

They swept down toward the 'drome, but a glimpse of it from afar warned them to approach warily. A black pillar of smoke was ascending from the field. And in the heart of the smoke was red flame.

Anxiety leapt up again in Bill Flint's heart. Who had crashed in flames upon the field? And what a crash! A dozen planes might have made the piled wreckage which flared in red fury on the 'drome. . . . And the field was crowded with men who milled about the flames. . . . Men who dashed about as if panic-stricken, ant-like figures on the far distant earth. Fire fighting. . . . No—Flint was nearer the aërodrome now—they seemed to move with no purpose, as if completely demoralized. Men who composed a crowded mass of moving figures which swept in waves this way and that . . . which crowded about the flaming mass of wreckage . . . men who ran about aimlessly. . . . Flint was gliding down now, near to the field. . . . Men who threw themselves upon one another . . . wrestling . . . fighting. . . . Then Flint was low over the field, and he saw the incredible truth . . . they were dancing!

Like a frantic bat Flint's Spad shrieked down above the crazy throng, Bud Kearney close behind him. In a wave the crowd swept across the field, leaving a clear place for him to land. He circled about and landed; but his wheels had hardly touched the earth before the mob was about him, laughing, singing, dancing.

"It's all over, Bill!" they cried. "All over!"

"Armistice signed this morning!" yelled Durland, and he chanted without dignity. "Signed this morning! Signed, signed, signed! Signed this morning, signed, signed, signed!"

"And we're never going to be shot at any more!" wailed Pennock, doing a crazy dance with Squires who locked arms with him.

"And we're burning up all the fuel!" sang Grandin. "All the bee-oo-tee-fool foo-ool!"

"Burn this!" yelled Seabrook, triumphantly leading toward the bonfire Potter and Postgate who carried Bud Kearney, kicking on their shoulders. "We won't need it any more."

"Any more, any more," voices started singing lustily to the tune of 'Far, Far Away.' "We won't need old Bud Kearney any more. Then we'll stick him in the blaze and go our different ways, for the bloomin' war don't need us any more!"

The chorus swept upward in a gust of happy, tuneless harmony, and all Seventy-Seven was dancing madly, idiotically about the blazing rubbish.

"Where's Gloria?"

Flint, standing, dazed and slightly intoxicated with mixed feelings, saw Breckford standing before him.

"Oh, the coin?" he gasped. Searching through his pockets he found it, and flipped it in his hand.

"Luck! Didn't I tell you. All that lady had left to do was bring the war to an end, and when you went up to fight the whole German Flying Corps she had to do that to save your neck."

"Luck?" questioned Flint. He stared without thought at the coin which had fallen, head up, in his palm.

"Sure, luck!" gloated Breckford. "Didn't I tell you she carried the goods?"

Flint had flipped the coin again. Again it fell head up.

"Wait a minute!" he cried. He flipped it again and again, a grin broadening on his face.

"Breckford," he said at last. "That cab driver you told us about certainly knew his stuff. This coin is loaded."

With an inarticulate cry Breckford snatched the silver dollar from him. He, too, flipped it, again and

again and again. Flint was right. The coin always fell head up.

"Gosh!" Breckford looked at it crestfallen. "Then what was it," he cried. "What was it that brought us through?"

Flint regarded him very seriously. Then his eyes swept the mad throng of cheering, singing men. Men who had come through. Men whom the war had been powerless to kill. Like himself. Like Bud. And what was the force that had preserved them?

He shook his head.

"Don't ask me," he said. "It's the thing we've all got to find out for ourselves."

(1)

THE END

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